

Thrown for a Loop

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Thrown for a Loop

by [enter_fand0m_reference00](#)

Summary

The first time Soap wakes up on the cobblestone street it sucks. The second time he assumes that he had a really weird premonition dream. By the fourth time, he's already convinced that he's being punished for something.

or

Time loops break everything Soap should know about reality, but it's hard to dispute what he's experiencing in real-time.

Loop 1 and 2

Chapter Summary

Soap dies and then wakes up and then dies again. It's all very not fun.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Soap wakes slowly, his whole body aching and his vision fading in and out. His brain felt scrambled for a moment and he struggles to get his bearings as he pushes himself up off of the chilled, hard cobblestone.

It all comes back in a rush as pain radiates from his shoulder. Fuck, he had been shot and had gotten separated. He had radioed to no response and then he had collapsed, seemingly for just a brief moment. He's alone and still hasn't heard anything on the radio, unless something came through in the short span he was down, that would be just his luck.

Alejandro was captured, or worse. Ghost was... hopefully Ghost was in the wind, that seemed to be the best-case scenario at present. Graves had betrayed them and now he was going to hunt them and Soap was in the middle of Las Almas with a gunshot wound in his shoulder. Things could be going better.

He pushes himself up, his body moving far more sluggishly than was desirable. His radio crackles at his side.

"Soap- This is Ghost. How copy?" A voice asks on the other side, Ghost's voice. Soap could weep, but he's too busy trying to get his sense of balance back, his hands still on the cobblestone.

"Johnny?" Ghost asks, just a bit of worry leaking into his voice, and Soap felt bad for having been the one to put it there. "Johnny... how copy?"

Soap opens his communication channel with a click. "Solid," he forces out between clenched teeth as he pulls himself forward towards better cover behind the car on the street.

The relief in Ghost's voice is almost palpable and Soap wonders

distantly why everyone thought he was so emotionless. “Thought we lost you.”

Soap finally pushes himself fully up to his feet, only swaying slightly before he gets his balance back. He can hear Shadows vaguely in the distance, a command from Graves to cordon off the area, and a mention of him and Ghost.

“You injured?” Ghost asks.

Soap brushes him off, giving a vague non-answer that didn’t seem to please Ghost too much. It’s better than telling him he had just been laying face down in the middle of the rain-slick street or that he could barely move his arm without hot, sharp pain in his shoulder. Those little tidbits would only make Ghost worry and it wouldn’t accomplish anything. Though he wonders if the injuries were bad enough if Ghost would just cut and run.

He wonders if Ghost would look for him instead. That’s silly, he reminds himself, shaking the thought out of his head.

It did make him wonder about something else though. “Where are you?”

“There’s a church. I’m headed to it. Let’s RV there,” Ghost’s voice is all business and though Soap is curious, he’s glad that Ghost doesn’t broadcast his actual location over the radio as it occurs to him that someone could be listening in easily. “You’ll need to improvise to survive.”

Down the street vehicles and Shadows are moving around. Somewhere near by Soap can hear them talking to each other, something about lining people up against a wall. He represses a shiver, he’s surrounded and these people are mowing through anyone they can get their hands on with no regard. It’s really beginning to dawn just how dire the whole situation is.

“Graves and the Shadows are on a killing spree,” Soap warns, the simple sentence settling heavily in his chest.

“Looking for Hassan,” Ghost states, and Soap can’t tell if he is reciting facts or trying to soothe his worries somewhat.

Soap shakes his head. “Hassan and us...”

The end of the street was quickly becoming clogged with movement

and sound so Soap doubles back slightly, heading through an alleyway. There are more Shadows on the other side, but a little more room to hide and sneak through. He can hear Graves barking orders and taunting the residents he had caught. Soap swears low under his breath, Graves is on one hell of a power trip, he only hopes that it might distract him and make his operation sloppy enough for Soap and Ghost to slip through the cracks. If Graves got his hands on either of them with the state he's in now... it didn't spell good things for their futures.

Soap ducks into a garage as Graves proclaims they had found some dirty cops. Two bodies were laid out in the garage, one propped up against the wall, one face down, they seemed to have been shot trying to hold off Shadows. The door to the house was still locked so something at least had gone right for the poor bastards, it wasn't helpful for Soap though.

Ghost urges him to look for supplies and Soap begins moving across the garage, opening a door to a small storage area.

"Welcome to guerilla warfare," Ghost states ominously, just as the door swings open and Soap finds another body curled up in the storage, blood splatter across the wall behind him. Ghost couldn't possibly know his sense of timing.

"Creepin' Jesus," Soap hisses, mostly to himself.

He grabs the rope from off the corpse and a broken fan blade from one of those old box fans. He uses those finds to fashion a blade and uses that to pry open the door under Ghost's instructions. It is, perhaps, a bit harder than it should have been with the twinges of pain still radiating from his shoulder.

He can still hear Graves's voice echoing from the streets, threatening and taunting and barking orders. At some point, a child cries for their mom. Soap cringes, distinctly aware that he can functionally do nothing, and does his best to zone it out, letting it all become white noise as he glances from room to room searching for anything that might help him.

Another body lays at the top of the stairs, Soap spots him as he goes up sideways, glancing back at the door leading to the street. It would take just one Shadow walking by at the wrong time and he would be screwed.

A man down the hall was collapsed against the floor, making feeble

attempts to get up. Soap looks his way, hoping that he looks different enough from the Shadows for the man to know he wasn't the enemy. Not that the man could have done anything to him in his state, just that he hates the idea of someone dying like that. If he had a weapon he might have offered a mercy kill, instead he just creeps by as silently as possible.

Graves is yelling about flushing out Hassan now, telling his men that the city is full of narcos and every citizen is helping shield them. It's so obviously utter bullshit from the outside that Soap could laugh at it if he wasn't experiencing the fallout of that belief firsthand.

"Keep your head on a swivel for these Brits..." Graves's voice echoes up from the street. "Take 'em dead or alive. You know my preference."

Soap rolls his eyes. Even trying to murder him the yankee still couldn't tell the difference between a Brit and a Scot. He lets the rather inane anger of that shield him from the thrum of fear he feels, not just for himself, but for Ghost too, who is still in Las Almas trying to guide him out of there.

He finds a headlamp and calls that enough exploring of that room, updating Ghost on his new inventory. Ghost seems pleased at that, but warns him to be careful with it.

"What's the latest?" Ghost asks after a pause.

"Mercs are killing everything in their path," Soap warns. He knows Ghost is still in the city but he has no idea how close to the church he is or if he's already there, he doesn't know how much danger Ghost is in.

"War crimes..." Ghost muses.

"Yeah," Soap responds bitterly as he digs through a cabinet and comes away with a roll of duct tape. "Makes me want to commit a few war crimes of my own."

"Tyranny," Ghost states simply. "It won't stand."

And once again Soap can't tell if Ghost is trying to soothe in his own strange way or simply stating things he believes.

"Think we'll get a green light to go after these guys?" Soap asks as he heads back towards the stairs to exit the house and get some more

forward momentum going.

“No more green lights, Johnny,” is the immediate response. “We’re on our own.”

He’s about to respond when he sees the outline of a Shadow at the bottom of the stairs, he tries to backpedal quickly, but the Shadow spots him at the same time he spots them. They call off a warning and fire at him.

“Fuck, *shite*,” Soap hisses as he turns back into the hallway, he can hear the thunder of boots coming up the stairs after him.

“What’s happening, Johnny?” Ghost asks tensely on the other end.

“Shadow fucker spotted me.”

“You need to shake ‘em,” Ghost states with conviction.

“I’m still in the house,” Soap whispers as he steps into a random bedroom.

A quiet pause follows as Ghost ponders this new information. That silence is filled with a caged dog barking at him from surprisingly close.

“Hell’s fuckin’ bells,” Soap swore, hearing the heavy booted footsteps turn their way.

“What now?”

“Did you see the caged dog?” Soap asks, curious as to what Ghost’s path might have been. He steps into the bathroom and takes the only hiding spot there is, behind the shower curtain.

“Fuck, he’ll alert to your position.”

“He already has,” Soap states and there’s something bittersweet in his tone that even he himself can’t quite place. It’s over, he knows it, it’s a done deal.

Ghost doesn’t seem to agree.

“What have you got?”

“Duct tape and a broken fan blade. L.T...”

“You’re going to have to rush the guy.”

“Ghost...” Soap tries again.

“You’ll have to rely on surprise, get in before he can get his weapon on you, stab before his hand touches his own knife.”

“Simon,” Soap says because Ghost isn’t listening. It brings Ghost to an abrupt stop. “I’m shot, in the shoulder. I don’t see this going well.”

A small sucked-in breath on the other side is all Soap can hear for a moment. The boots have entered the bedroom, Soap is cornered in the bathroom.

“Don’t talk like that Johnny.”

“Just give Graves hell for me when you get your hands on him.”

“I will,” comes the solemn reply as the door to the bathroom swings open.

Soap waits until the Shadow is close to the shower curtain and dives out, tackling them. The surprise tactic actually works for a moment, the Shadow is knocked down, but yells and grabs onto Soap’s shirt, pulling him down too.

The broken fan blade does its job as a makeshift weapon and presses into the Shadow’s neck, blunt metal crunching against sinew and sliding against blood. It should be too blunt, but it has all of Soap’s body weight behind it and almost no resistance from the Shadow underneath him.

The landing seals the deal, but it also jostles Soap’s shoulder terribly and he makes a pained sound before cussing. More boots are coming.

“Sit-rep Johnny.”

Soap’s voice wheezes slightly in pain, but he responds as he pushes up to his feet. “Killed the fucker, more coming.”

“Get out of there.”

“Tryin’ ta sir,” Soap says as he scans the room. “There’s a balcony, I’m goin’ for it.”

Whether Ghost protests or supports his idea Soap has no clue; he takes off at a dead sprint for the railing as the door to the bedroom slams

open. A bullet gets him in the leg, but he's already launched himself over the railing.

He crumples when he hits the ground and pain shoots up through his legs, the bullet wound in his shoulder and now in the back of his knee feel like fire. He quickly realizes he can't get back up, not really, but he lays there for a moment trying to gather himself like that might change things.

"Johnny?"

"Ahm sorry Si," Soap responds, his words slurring together just slightly.

"Johnny, what's happening?"

Soap is too busy dragging himself to the side of the road to respond. He knows he's dying but wants to decrease the chances of his corpse playing speedbump for the military vehicles moving around the area.

"Johnny, do you copy?" There's Ghost's voice again. Soap is starting to feel really distant, he wonders vaguely if he also hit his head on the landing or if this is all blood loss, he really can't remember.

"MacTavish," Ghost tries in a commanding voice and he never calls Soap that so Soap knows he's pissed as hell.

Soap thinks that maybe he hears another gunshot, but he's honestly so gone he couldn't tell where it came from or where it's going. All he knows is that his body finally gives out and his eyes slide shut.

Soap wakes on cold, rain-slicked cobblestone. His body aches and his vision slides out of focus before righting itself. For a moment he wonders if he had simply passed out again, he could've sworn he was dying, but maybe he had been being dramatic.

He pushes himself up and pain radiates from his shoulder, but, other than the vague ache of overuse, the rest of his body seems fine. Now that's definitely strange because dying or not his brain definitely didn't make up the gunshot and shattered kneecap. He looks around to take in his surroundings and immediately feels his whole world go off-kilter.

He's right back where he started.

He's so thrown off by what he supposed must have been a crazy realistic dream that he misses the first radio transmission. The second one has him snapping back to reality.

"Johnny?" Ghost's voice sounds exactly the same as his dream, down to the same note of worry to it. Soap scrambles to click open his communication channel.

"Johnny... how copy?"

"Solid," Soap responds if only to not worry him. *How does one tell their commanding officer they've already dreamed this exact conversation?*

"Thought we lost you," Ghost says warmly as Soap pushes himself up to his feet.

Soap stands there for a moment and listens as he can distantly hear Graves making the exact same commands, punctuated by the exact same gunfire. This is the most intense déjà vu he's ever experienced.

"You injured?"

"What's the difference?" Soap grumbles.

"Life or death. Keep your blood in, you'll need every drop," Ghost states solemnly.

In another situation, Soap might have teased him about how the only reason no one called him a dork when he said stuff like that was because they were too scared of him. As it is, Soap is quite tempted to tell him how miserably he had already failed that task... or not failed, since it was a dream. Either way, he doesn't mention the bullet wound that he very much does still have in his arm.

So instead, Soap says, "Thanks for the tip." Because that's easier.

There's a long pause of silence as Soap makes his way down the alley, he doesn't think to ask where Ghost is, his brain is filling in information from his dream like it happened in real life. Which it might as well have because without Soap's prompting Ghost eventually speaks again.

"There's a church. I'm headed to it. Let's RV there."

Soap grunts in affirmation as if the perfect recreation of a dream conversation isn't making his head spin.

“You’ll need to improvise to survive.”

“Graves and the Shadows are on a killing spree,” Soap remembers to warn. Ghost is in the city somewhere, he deserves to know.

“Looking for Hassan.”

“And us,” Soap states. “Graves has an order out to take ‘the Brits’ dead or alive.”

It doesn’t occur to him until after he says it that that was dream information. Why in the bloody Christ had that shit been so real? He didn’t believe in premonition, but he might have to start if he was going to be experiencing it personally.

“Oh, so you’re safe then?” Ghost asks with humor in his voice.

“Aye, only because he can’t tell I’m Scottish despite introductions and working together.”

Soap ducks into the garage and barely even reacts to the bodies there before he reminds himself that he isn’t supposed to know that they’re there already. He decides to take this premonition thing in stride, if he’s going to have his worldview turned over the least he can do is make it work for him.

“Door’s locked,” Soap informs Ghost without even trying the handle.

He’s already in the storage area when Ghost responds.

“Look for supplies- things you can make tools with.”

Soap doesn’t inform him that it’s unnecessary, there’s something about having Ghost in his ear that’s kind of calming and he would hate to make the big guy feel like he wasn’t being helpful.

“Welcome to guerilla warfare,” Ghost still, somehow, has impeccable timing with that line because it’s said right as Soap turns away from the box fan and his eyes land on the storage room’s corpse one more time.

The house is exactly the same and so is the sound rising up from the street. Soap swears Graves’s shit sounds dumber on a second listen; Soap catches more of it this time, not zoning out like before, and wishes he could punch Graves in the nose every time he says some stupid shit.

“What’s the latest?” Ghost asks after a while of Soap moving around in silence.

“Mercs are killing everything in their path.”

“War crimes...”

“Makes me want to commit a few war crimes of my own,” Soap says as he digs out the duct tape he already knew was there.

“Tyranny. It won’t stand.” Ghost states, delivering another line Soap wants to call dorky, but Ghost says it with too much conviction for him to mock.

“Think we’ll get the green light to go after these guys?”

“No more green lights, Johnny. We’re on our own.”

Soap’s stomach drops as his brain catches back up with his muscle memory and he realizes this is the part where it all went to shit, but he doesn’t go near the stairs. Instead, he turns towards the bedrooms and he doesn’t hear anyone pursuing him, so he lets himself breathe a bit easier.

“What about Alejandro?” Soap asks if only to distract himself.

“Alejandro you can trust,” Ghost states, and Soap is almost surprised to hear the confidence in his voice as he says it. “But he’s in Graves custody. If he’s even alive...”

Ah yes, the whole thing that kicked off this mess. Maybe Soap shouldn’t have brought up Alejandro. At least, not until later.

“Alejandro es nuestro hermano. If he’s alive, he’s on our side.”

Soap uses the fan blade to pry open one of the locked doors, searching for more materials or tools.

“Be careful who you trust, Sergeant. People you know can hurt you the most.”

“You speak from experience?” Soap teases before his brain can catch up with why that might be a bad idea to ask.

“Yes and I keep re-learning the same lesson,” Ghost responds and there’s a cold edge to his voice. Soap doesn’t think the coldness is aimed at him, but he still hates that he has introduced it to the

conversation.

Soap's a bit distracted by his conversational fuck-up so the dog takes him by surprise. His response to it stays the same.

"Hell's fuckin' bells."

"What is it?" Ghost asked, there's concern there, but not nearly as palpable as it had been in the dream.

"Did you see the caged dog?"

"Big geezer. If he barks, shoot him and repo quickly- don't get compromised..."

"You are stone cold, Simon," Soap responds with a shake of his head.

He's sure that someone is coming to check on the situation, but they aren't immediately on his tail like last time. Still, he skips the bathroom and heads straight for the balcony.

"What has two legs and bleeds?" Ghost asks.

"What?"

"Half a dog," Ghost states immediately. Soap swears he can hear the self-satisfied smirk on his voice.

"Sorry I asked."

This time Soap swings his leg over the railing of the balcony and lowers himself down before dropping the rest of the way. It fucking hurts, but it's not the game-ending blow he took last time he went over that railing so he calls it a win.

It occurs to him that he's beginning to accept the dream as reality and he's not quite sure how to feel about that, he promises he'll have a little therapy sesh about it with Rodolfo or something if he gets out of this, that guy always hears him out and is just superstitious enough that he might take premonition seriously. At the moment though, he has run out of premonition, it's all new to him from here on out.

Ghost must hear his impact and pained breath because he's on comms again immediately.

"Gimme a sit-rep."

“Outside... gated alley.”

“Stick to the edges and stay low,” is Ghost’s advice for that one.

“Copy.”

There’s a pause, not a long one, but Soap supposes with having only comms to check in on each other neither of them much likes the quiet right now.

“You may get a brag rag for this,” Ghost says.

“A medal?”

“Chest candy.”

“That’s all rubbish,” Soap grumbles as he makes his way out of the alley.

He can practically hear Ghost shrug on the other side. “You said you wanted a win. Congratulations, you’re a winner.”

“Away n’ bile yer heid,” Soap says, but there’s no real heat.

“*English*, MacTavish.”

“Sorry sir, let me translate,” Soap smiles as he enunciates every word. “Go fuck yourself.”

“Much better,” Ghost responds and Soap finds himself really grinning despite the situation.

Soap takes the stairs up into someone else’s abandoned home. There’s a candle lying on a table that he snatches, but sadly no guns or polished hunting knives, if only life could be easy.

“Church is on the north side of the city,” Ghost states, turning back to business. “I’ve set up a sniper position in the church tower. Find your way there and you just might make it.”

Soap feels a modicum of relief to know that at the very least Ghost isn’t also wandering around on street level anymore. They’re both still in danger, but Ghost can at least see most of the danger headed his way and Soap will have an eye in the sky if he ever gets close enough to the church for Ghost to see him. It’s small, but it feels like a turn for the better.

Just as he's thinking that Soap comes to what appears to be a plaza with a fountain in the center. He can hear Shadows yelling at those resisting and a man begging for his life. Soap has no clue if the man had really worked with the narcos or not, but being gunned down on your knees is a bad end for anyone. He doesn't like Graves's idea of justice or punishment.

"Graves is rounding up cops."

"He's judge, jury, and executioner now," Ghost voices Soap's inner thoughts.

Soap doesn't respond. Instead, he drops down into a plant bed. He needs to make it around the plaza and it's not going to be easy. He can see the church in the distance now, but it seems impossibly far away.

He's doing his best to creep around the outside perimeter, ducking behind planters, listening in on the two Shadows chatting about whether or not they're scared of Ghost (or "big dude with the skull-face" as one puts it) when he slips up. He leaves cover too early and one of the Shadows catches him out of the corner of his eye.

"What was that?" The guy asks his buddy.

"Dunno, check it out."

"Mary and Joseph," Soap grumbles.

"What is it?" Ghost asks.

"Slipped up," Soap whispers.

Ghost goes silent and Soap can't tell if he's pondering what to say next, trying to help Soap stay quiet, or giving up on Soap's dumbass and turning his radio off. Soap stays crouched behind the planter and weighs his options (candle, broken fan blade, bare hands)... they aren't great.

The Shadow comes up at his side and spots him. Soap lunges at him as he is opening his mouth to shout. His broken fan blade is knocked to the side as he knocks the guy's gun out of his hand and the guy shoves him back. The small of Soap's back slams into a cart and it *hurts*, but he doesn't have time to focus on that.

He ducks under the Shadow's wild grab at him and grabs a bottle off the cart, smashing it against the edge to give him something sharp.

The Shadow flips out a knife.

The other Shadow is well aware of the situation by now, but he's still at a distance and he probably won't fire while Soap is in close with his buddy. Which means Soap can't let the knife deter him. It's life or death and so, while not his proudest decision, Soap aims for the face.

He catches the guy across the jaw, but it glances off as the Shadow wrenches his head back. The knife swing, predictably, follows and Soap avoids the arc easily enough. He goes for another swing with the broken bottle, but the guy recovers faster than he expected and Soap is forced to deal with the knife instead.

He's able to kick the Shadow back and the guy loses his hold on the knife and it goes skittering away across the cobblestone. Soap is on him as he falls back, broken bottle ready. The guy grabs his wrist with one hand and moves to push Soap off with the other.

Normally, it would do nothing, but the heel of his hand comes into hard contact with the still-bleeding bullet wound in Soap's shoulder. Soap falters with a yell of surprise and pain. That's enough for the Shadow to punch him square in the nose. Soap is so high on adrenaline that he hears the crunch of it, more than he feels it, but either way his eyes water. That gives the Shadow enough time to switch their positions.

He gets himself behind Soap, twists his wrist until the bottle drops from his hold, and pulls his injured arm up behind him. It pulls terribly on the bullet wound which begins bleeding heavier in response. All he can do for a moment is breathe through gritted teeth and wait for his whited-out vision to come back.

"Johnny, what's happening?" Ghost's voice echoes from the radio and Soap has never felt so relieved to know he wasn't abandoned and so scared that Ghost will give himself away at the same time.

"You godda cuh n' run, Sahmon," Soap mumbles through the pain and the probably-broken nose.

The Shadow looks at Soap and then at the radio. "Is that the skull-face fucker?"

Soap grits his teeth and doesn't answer.

The other Shadow had made his way over to them. "Holy shit, Wilson. I thought you were fucking screwed, man."

The other man scoffs. “Yeah, fat load of good you did.”

“Get in a fight closer to my location next time.”

“Yeah, you’ll be real fucking close when I punch you in the nose,” Wilson promises before he kicks Soap in the back of the knees, making him kneel on the cobblestone in front of his partner.

“Ok, playtime’s over,” the other Shadow says and Soap bets he feels real cool saying that. He doesn’t roll his eyes though, since the Shadow has a gun leveled at his face. “Where’s the rest of your crew?”

“Fuh if ah nah,” Soap mentally updates his nose to ‘definitely broken’.

“Fuck and I thought Braveheart was hard to understand.”

“Ya would,” Soap says and Wilson understands that well enough to smack him in the back of the head for it. It doesn’t even hurt really, it’s just the humiliation of being treated like a misbehaving schoolboy that bruises his ego.

“Where’s skull-face?” The other Shadow asks harshly.

“Gahn,” Soap coughs and then spits out some of the blood trying to slide down his throat from his nasal passages.

And, he supposes, he should thank premonition for getting him this far. He’s going to die or be put in custody, but at least he can get a few off of Ghost’s tail. They’ll still look for him, but hopefully if one of his trusted officers says he’s gone with enough conviction maybe they won’t put their whole hearts into it.

It’s a paltry consolation, but he’s doing his best to be cool about the whole thing.

“Then who was that you were talkin’ to on your radio?”

Soap smiles up at him and knows that his teeth are coated in blood. “Yah mahm.”

He probably shouldn’t have been surprised by the bullet, but he doesn’t really get to be surprised for long.

Everything goes black.

Chapter End Notes

I really wanted to write a time loop fic and this seemed like a pretty good candidate lol. Unfettered whump! I hope you guys like it as much as I'm having fun writing this. Like, I'm going crazy making sure the dialogue lines up before Soap starts going super off-script, but I'm having fun!

Thanks to anyone who is leaving kudos or comments, I love to hear what you guys think! See you next chapter! ☐

Loop 3 - 20 something

Chapter Summary

Having accepted that he is in a time loop, Soap proceeds to have the worst time ever

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Soap wakes on cold, hard, wet cobblestones and his vision slides before righting itself. He doesn't kid himself this time. He knows before he even looks around.

He's right back where he started.

It makes no sense. It breaks the rules of the world he knows, but here he is laying on the ground with a bullet wound in his shoulder and no bullet in his forehead, which is exactly where it went in the plaza.

He wonders if it's a blessing or a curse. Sure, he's not some random casualty slumped over in the street, but he has died twice now and he keeps being placed back in the exact same spot, which is a random city street way too far away from the church and surrounded by enemies.

"Soap- This is Ghost. How copy?"

"Solid copy," Soap responds immediately, clicking open his communication channel, since he's still on the ground and not distracted by trying to get up. Which reminds him that he should probably get up.

He groans as he pulls himself forward and up onto his feet. Soap must have responded too quickly to cause worry because Ghost grunts in response.

"Good to hear."

Soap feels a strange longing for "*thought we lost you.*" It's dumb so Soap moves on.

Ghost is still reasonably concerned though, because the next question is still, "you injured?"

Soap simply sighs. "I'm not a medic."

"Tell me something I don't know."

Soap's brain immediately fills with a thousand embarrassing things he would rather die than let Ghost know because it's always just so maliciously compliant like that. He bites down on a response.

Ghost still warns him to keep his blood in his body and Soap wonders if he just really likes that line and will say it no matter what, Soap thanks him for the tip as if it's the first time he's heard it.

He doesn't waste time waffling around, he cuts straight to the path he's already carved out twice now. He listens to Graves yell about stuff and the Shadows chat about random bullshit, usually circling around the topic of the 141 and often Ghost specifically.

The house plays out exactly the same, the same words from Graves, the same items found, the same bodies in the same places. He's becoming numb to it and it's only his third cycle and he's not even sure if the last one counts since he spent most of the time swearing up and down it was premonition. He tries not to think too hard about what it actually is, he still can't make sense of *that*.

He ends up having the same conversations with Ghost like it's an itch he has to scratch. He brings up green lights just to hear Ghost's same response. This time instead of bringing up Alejandro though he goes for Price instead, he knows there's some sort of closeness between the two so he's hoping that may ease things.

"Price isn't here is he?" Ghost responds and Soap swears he almost sounds like he's sulking. "The old man can't bale us out. Not this time."

"I trust the captain-" Soap states in a way he hopes is soothing without being overbearing. "If he knew he'd be here."

Ghost sighs on the other end, the response is the same as last time.

"Be careful who you trust, Sergeant. People you know can hurt you the most."

Soap takes the light route this time. "Good advice, L.T. I wanna be like you when I grow up," it's lightly teasing and he thinks he hears an appreciative huff on the other side, but it's impossible to tell really with the amount of fuzz the radio is putting out.

“You wanna be better than me, Johnny...” Ghost responds and there’s something warm in his tone that makes Soap smile.

“I will be,” Soap states with humorous over-confidence, he knows he is giving Ghost the room to take him out at the knees with his next comment if he would like, and Ghost often does, it’s just part of how they talk to each other now.

“Good man,” Ghost praises instead.

Soap lets himself fall quiet as he approaches the bedroom door.

“Big dog,” he states, mostly as a reminder to himself, but Ghost takes it as a conversational opener.

“Big geezer. If he barks, shoot him and repo quickly- don’t get compromised...”

“You are stone cold, Simon,” Soap decides to say the exact same line as last time, mostly because Ghost didn’t get mad at him for saying Simon last time and he likes to have a reason to say it, the name sits nicely on his tongue.

“What has two legs and bleeds?” Ghost asks.

“Don’t tell me,” Soap groans.

“Half a dog,” Ghost says anyways, as close to gleeful as the big scary man can get.

“I asked you not to tell me...” Soap complains as he goes over the balcony railing.

The impact still hurts even though he knows it’s coming.

“Outside. Gated alley,” Soap informs before Ghost can even ask.

Ghost gives him the same advice and he’s lucky that Soap likes listening to his voice so much because he listens attentively even though it is information he already knows. Most of the time it’s information he knows from before the loops even started, he went through training as any soldier does. He wonders if it makes Ghost feel better to ensure that Soap knows or if Ghost just assumes that he was a dumbass who flitted along bubble-brained through every round of training. Either way, he lets Ghost do it.

They have the same conversation about medals, all the way down to

Soap telling Ghost to go fuck himself.

“Much better,” Ghost says just like last time, and Soap smiles just the same even though he knew it was coming.

This time when Soap drops down into the plaza his first move is to grab an empty bottle. He doesn't even realize that he has verbally checked it into his (very minimal) arsenal until Ghost comments on the uses of an empty bottle.

Soap plays it safe and takes Ghost up on his idea, tossing the bottle to the other side of the plaza. The broken glass rings as it strikes the stone and, even though that was the point, after so long of trying to sneak around silently Soap finds himself flinching. He doesn't comment on that.

The two Shadows go after the sound as hoped.

“Chucked a bottle,” Soap informs Ghost. “Worked like a charm.”

“Told ya...” Ghost says, his only slightly more grown-up version of the childish *‘told ya soooo’* and Soap can hear the satisfaction in his tone. “Pay attention and you just might learn something.”

Soap is, once again, tempted to tell Ghost about the lessons he's already learned, but he can't think of a way to bring up time loops that doesn't sound extremely insane and Ghost has enough on his plate trying to get Soap to the church, he doesn't need to also think there's a mid-fight breakdown happening.

He sneaks his way into an ice cream parlor- or maybe it's shaved ice, he can't tell, his Spanish is still shit- and he discusses smoke bombs with Ghost while he collects up more supplies.

“A toxic distraction,” Ghost says.

Soap finds himself smiling. “Sick... I like it.”

“Guarantee you they won't.”

He's starting to feel confident, starting to think that maybe he'll actually see this nightmare out as he dips in and out of different stores and alleyways. Which is, of course, exactly when his luck has to turn.

He hears two different Shadows discussing him and Ghost, or “that asshole with the mask” and “the leprechaun”, it doesn't take a great

leap of logic to figure out who they're talking about. Soap would almost be thankful for the American who knew the difference between the Scottish and Irish and corrects his buddy, but that guy sounds like he's also gunning for him so he considers it a wash.

He's turning to take a different route when he hears a shout of warning. He takes off sprinting, hoping the Shadows aren't on their game and he can lose them in the maze of alleys and stores. He doesn't even register the bullet, just the sound and everything going black.

Soap wakes on cold, hard, wet cobblestones with a frustrated groan. He pushes himself up to his feet immediately, damn his aching body and the pain lancing through his shoulder. It's his fourth ride in this highly specific, super annoying rodeo and he has decided that it is definitely a punishment for something.

He's feeling angry and petty and so, when Ghost radios like he always does, Soap debates the merits of not responding before deciding that that would just be punishing Ghost for Soap being a dumbass who got shot... again.

"Solid," Soap responds after a moment.

"Thought we lost you," Ghost says and the more Soap hears that sentence the more it starts to sound like '*thought I lost you*', but Soap tries to shake the wishful thinking of *that*.

"Yeah..." Soap says because, now that he's already on his feet and not distracted by the whole dragging his body upwards thing, he really feels like it's a statement that deserves a response but he doesn't have any good ones on hand. He should plan one for next time, he thinks, before his brain catches up with the fact that 'next time' insinuates that he's going to die again and that time loops will continue being a thing even though they totally shouldn't be.

"You injured?"

"I'm good," Soap responds, just to change things up.

"Let's find out how good you are," Ghost says in his low gravelly voice and that is definitely Soap's favorite response so far so he slides that knowledge into his back pocket for future use.

The... well, everything is exactly the same. Soap glides through the house, barely ducking or hiding, when he does it's because he knows he should, not because he actually heard or saw anything.

This time when they talk about green lights and trust Soap brings up Laswell.

"Laswell's close with Shepherd. Callin' her's a no-go until we learn more," Ghost states evenly and it makes sense. Soap wonders if he'll have enough loops to make it through the whole list of people they know. They don't actually know that many so the answer is looking like yes unless this loop works out for him.

Soap knows what Ghost has to say about him trusting people so he swings in the opposite direction. "I don't trust anyone right now, even Laswell."

Maybe Soap is reading too much into things, but Ghost sounds almost saddened when he responds. "We'll see. Just make sure you can trust yourself. Start there..."

"Good advice, L.T." Soap says with a grim smile. "I wanna be like you when I grow up."

"You want to be better than me, Johnny," Ghost responds predictably.

"I've got my work cut out then," Soap responds because Ghost deserves to hear it, in the whole mess Soap is beginning to think that Ghost's voice is the only thing keeping him sane. He knows anyone in the 141 would joke about what a scary thought *that* was if he ever admitted it to anyone.

"That you do," Ghost states evenly, his voice neutral, but Soap knows him well enough to know that he's preening in his own sullen Ghost way.

Soap doesn't announce the dog this time, but Ghost still somehow knows because he slips the advice and the half-a-dog joke in anyways. Even that joke is beginning to feel comforting and that's how Soap knows he's on the downhill slide in the sanity department. For some reason he thought he would be holding up better, it's only loop four. The insanity of remembering he's in a time loop *and* doing a piss-poor job at it knocks him down another sanity point.

Over the balcony. Down the alley, Up more stairs. Pick up the *same fucking candle* even though he hasn't actually used it yet. Talk church

with Ghost. Down into the plaza. Bottle distraction. Into the ice cream/shaved-ice place. Talk smoke bombs with Ghost. Routine.

It's certifiably insane when he thinks about it, but it's routine, so he doesn't.

Here's where it gets new.

Soap hears the same two red, white, and blue dumbasses talking about leprechauns and kilts so he slows down, stepping into the doorway of a clothing shop. He takes one of the empty bottles he has picked up and tosses it into another storefront before ducking fully into the clothing shop.

The Shadows, predictably, follow the sound and Soap fades back into the darkness of the unlit backrooms of the shop. He flicks his headlamp on and scours the space for anything useful.

"How's it going, Johnny?" Ghost asks and Soap has definitely picked up on the complete drop of his callsign and the overuse of his nickname, but he likes it and doesn't want Ghost to stop so he doesn't comment.

"Picked up some tape."

"Very useful."

"If I have to wrap a gift?" Soap asks, slightly sarcastically.

"So to speak... hold on to it."

Soap moves through different rooms, eventually coming upon a slumped-over Shadow with a spray of drying blood on the wall behind them. Soap wrenches the knife from their neck and appraises it. It looks familiar.

"Ghost, you missing a knife?"

"Several," is the dark-toned response, it reminds Soap of why everyone sees him as a predator, he sounds dangerous.

"I think I found one."

"Some of the dead Shadows are my handiwork."

"You came through here?" Soap asks though the answer is obvious.

“On my way to the church.”

“And you left me?”

“I’m used to working alone,” Ghost states. He sounds slightly defensive and Soap feels a bit bad. He’s glad Ghost went straight to the church, glad the both of them aren’t stumbling around in the blind trying to find each other, it is- by all accounts- the right choice. Soap can’t help but want to tease him about it anyways.

“So much for no man left behind,” Soap bemoans.

“Just get yourself to the church,” Ghost says and Soap knows he’s rolling his eyes. Soap’s weirdly happy for being in the middle of an active warzone, this way of talking is familiar. “Tryin’ to keep you alive and get you here in one piece. One of us needs to survive to tell the tale.”

Soap frowns at the last sentence as he sets about wiping the knife off. “What are my odds?”

“Don’t make me bet against you. Still got a lot of ground to cover.”

It’s Ghost for ‘really shit, but I’m trying really hard to be an optimist.’

Soap’s heading back towards the front of the store when a figure enters through the door. The Shadow spots him before he can duck into cover and levels a gun in his direction and Soap is *so done* with getting shot.

“Shit,” Soap hisses and launches the only weapon he has at the guy, Ghost’s knife.

“Talk to me, Johnny.”

The knife clips the guy in the arm which makes him drop the gun, but now he has a gun at his feet and a knife shallowly in his arm and all Soap has are bare hands, a candle, and a broken fan blade *again*.

“Fuck me,” Soap swears and charges at the guy, taking him by surprise with a tackle.

They’re both on the floor. Soap goes for the knife but the guy grabs his wrist and attempts to push him off. His other hand gets around the grip of the knife and the way that the guy twists under him has the knife coming away in Soap’s hand instead of driving deeper in.

The guy gets a foot underneath Soap's stomach and kicks him off before he's immediately on top of Soap, grappling for the knife. He has his hands around Soap's wrists and pins them above his head so that the knife is fucking useless. Soap tries to twist and buck underneath him, but he's having the intense displeasure of realizing the Shadow is quite a large and heavy guy.

Part of him is tempted to make a 'buy me dinner first' joke, but he's breathless and way too focused on not dying and the holy hell the position is putting his injured shoulder through. He does spit out "bloody bastard" with enough venom to make a cobra blush though.

The guy lifts and slams Soap's wrist at an odd angle against the tile floor, eliciting a sound that's comparable to a surprised and pained yelp from a kicked dog and Soap thinks he *just might* be embarrassed to have Ghost hear that when he can focus on anything else again. The knife clatters from his hold and the guy goes for it.

Soap takes the chance to buck the man off of him and tries to change positions. He almost achieves, but the guy gets ahold of the knife and swings it upwards and Soap has to jerk back to avoid a very interesting scar. The Shadow takes advantage and knocks Soap onto his back, his head bouncing painfully against the tile.

The guy is moving quickly. Or maybe Soap is moving slowly. He doesn't know, he can't be sure. Either way, the knife is coming down in an arc and the Shadow has one hand planted on Soap's chest pinning him in place. Soap twists and manages to get the dead center of his face out of the way, but the knife still takes a chunk of his cheek with it and Soap **yells**.

"Johnny? Johnny?!" He can hear Ghost calling, but the guy on top of him is recovering from his miss.

Realizing that even injured and dazed Soap is just a bit too finicky to kill cleanly the Shadow aims for center mass and drives the knife down into Soap's torso. All Soap can do is make a punched-out sound, like all the air has left his body. The guy yanks the knife out and drives it down again and again and again and *wow* it is *so much worse* than being shot.

Soap is still making feeble attempts to get out from under him, mostly on autopilot if he's honest with himself, which means each stab hits a completely new target. His hands scramble against the wet tile in the growing pool of blood under his body. His hand wraps around the grip

of a pistol and he lifts it with all the effort left in his body and shoots the Shadow directly between the eyes.

The Shadow is taken with the momentum of the bullet and collapses backward instead of on top of Soap, *thank God*.

“Soap, sit-rep... Now, MacTavish!” Ghost commands through the radio as if putting on his commander voice will un-stab Soap.

“Si,” Soap tries and becomes aware that he is making awful choked croaking noises as he tries to simply breathe.

Oh. Blood is pooling in his lungs, he realizes as he hacks and gasps.

“Hold on, Johnny,” Ghost whispers, but there’s no hope in his voice. He realized where this was going at the same time as Soap.

“Si... Si-” Soap feels strangely frustrated. He wants to tell Ghost... well, he’s not exactly sure what he wants to tell Ghost, but he can’t find to air to even try.

“It’s okay Johnny, it’s alright,” Ghost says and his voice is so soft and so soothing that it throws Soap completely. “You’re okay, I’m with you, just... just close your eyes. I’ll be there soon.”

Soap knows it’s a lie, he knows he’s dying. In fact, he knows it’s surprising he’s still conscious, but Ghost’s words soothe him anyways.

Soap wakes face down on cold cobblestone, which feels really strange because he died face up. And then knowing that makes him feel even stranger. Ghost’s words are still echoing in the back of his head. And that feels strange too, he’s never heard Ghost so distressed or so quiet and soothing, it was the first time Ghost had ever felt soft or small to him.

It’s so raw and achingly human and the loop has restarted and it doesn’t exist anymore. And Soap has a hard time sorting out his feelings on that one, he’s glad that that pain doesn’t exist for Ghost, but then again it’s very real to him.

Soap pushes himself up to his feet and radios back when Ghost speaks faithfully.

This loop teaches Soap that patience really is a virtue or, at the very

least, timing really fucking matters.

He moves too quickly, already knowing all the moves. The thing he doesn't consider is that the Shadows won't be moving any faster to account for his knowledge. Ghost has just asked if he's injured when he ducks into the garage. He's there way too early, Graves hasn't called out about the dirty cops yet and so there's still a Shadow inside, dispatching one of the residents.

Soap gets a bullet to the head before Ghost can even get to his sentence about keeping the blood in his body.

At least it's quick.

Soap readjusts for the timing and takes it all at a normal human speed.

He quickly becomes aware of how small, split-second choices change the whole game, even when he gets the timing completely right. He's shot around the plaza and in the shops and back alleys a good four or five times before he finally gets his path sorted out.

Each time he wakes up face down on the cobblestone he's just a bit more frustrated. At least the gunshot deaths are fairly quick, he doesn't have to bear Ghost trying to soothe him in his final hours only to wake up the second the curtains close on the previous loop.

Wake up. Answer Ghost's radio. Make it through the house. Listen to Ghost's joke about half a dog he somehow always slips in (which he's actually starting to laugh at and he thinks he might really be cracking).

Over the railing of the balcony (this step he is getting progressively more reckless with as he learns his limits and his lack of patience wins out).

"You might get a brag rag for this," Ghost states and Soap thinks it's maybe his tenth or twelfth time having this conversation, but he's just happy to hear Ghost being all sarcastic about things.

"A medal?" Soap muses as he heads directly to the useful shit he already knows is in the alleyway.

“Chest candy,” Ghost says and Soap pictures him folding his arms and turning his nose up like a snob, it’s surprisingly accurate to the tone of his voice, and Soap chuckles to himself. God, he’s cracking.

“I deserve one,” Soap grouses, mostly to himself since Ghost has no way of knowing the broader context.

Ghost just hums on the other side of the comms, he sounds bemused by Soap’s grumbles.

This time he makes it past the plaza and most of the alleyways he’s been shot in previously. Each familiar storefront sends a jolt through him, but he pushes through it. He’s feeling strangely proud of himself for a bastard who’s died a minimum of ten times.

It makes the rifle tied with a trip wire at some random door all the more insulting.

He collapses back with a patch of growing red over his stomach and slumps to the ground with a defeated sound.

“Johnny?”

“Rifle. Tripwire. My dumbass,” Soap summarizes.

“Oh,” Ghost replies simply. Soap can’t quite place his tone. Sad? Disappointed? Distressed? Accepting?

The bleed is slow enough for Soap to throw a little pity party before it’s curtains once again.

He rocks his head back against the wall. “I’m never fucking getting out of here, L.T.”

“Just hold on, Johnny. You can do that, you’re stronger than you’re giving yourself credit for.”

They’re empty words with nothing but hope backing them. Ghost is once again trying to will Soap into survival. He promises he’ll try a bit harder the next loop. He doesn’t know how he could try any harder than he already is, but he promises anyways because hearing Ghost’s tone shift like this is breaking his heart.

Soap wakes up on excruciatingly familiar cobblestones and sighs. He lets himself lay there for a little bit without moving. The reception to

the pity party.

“Soap- This is Ghost. How copy?”

Soap sighs again and pushes himself up. Show time.

He makes it around the plaza, through most of the shops and alleys. He pockets an adrenaline shot for later and makes it all the way to the bar. He is once again feeling quite proud of himself, which is where things usually start to go to shit so he stamps the feeling down as best as he can.

“You like tequila?” Ghost asks when Soap updates him on his position.

“Could use one right about now,” Soap states, and once again Ghost doesn’t even know the half of it.

“I’d murder for a whiskey,” he says conversationally.

“You mean Scotch?” Soap playfully corrects.

“I drink bourbon.”

“Ah, like a good ol’ boy,” Soap says with the kind of smile he only has when he’s found a new joke to latch on to.

“I love Kentucky,” Ghost states and his voice sounds neutral, but Soap knows he’s smiling.

Soap is headed toward the church again when he feels himself grow woozy, his legs collapse underneath him and he cusses, pulling himself over to the wall. He puts a hand on it and tries to lift himself, but ends up just collapsing at the base of it.

“Johnny?” Ghost asks.

Soap leans back and looks up at the sky, his head swimming. His hands reach for the adrenaline he pocketed, but it’s like he’s wearing heavy-duty winter mittens, his hands slide uselessly at his side and he can’t get them to grip anything.

“Ah,” he mutters.

“Johnny?” Ghost prompts again.

“Note tae sel, take the stim afore ye foonder neist time.”

“English, Johnny,” Ghost says in his ‘I’m being very patient’ voice.

“Sorry, sur,” Soap responds, but doesn’t translate.

“Just stay awake, Soap. I’m coming to you.”

Soap is able to refrain from telling him that that’s the literal last thing he wants him to do, to risk himself for Soap’s dumbass, only because he passes out before his brain can translate the sentiment into words that will make sense to Simon.

Soap lays on the cobblestone for a while after he wakes and starts ranking his deaths by least to most embarrassing which is a certifiably cracked thing to do, but in his defense, he just died because he couldn’t get to the stim that was literally in his back pocket so that one’s definitely up there on the embarrassing scale. It might actually be reining champ right now and he really isn’t looking to knock it from that pedestal either.

Things play out pretty much the same as every other time he did everything right. A couple of close calls, but nothing much. He gets his hands on a gun. He calls Ghost a good ol’ boy again because it’s funny.

“L.T. ‘bout to play rough with the Shadows,” Soap promises as he sets the mouse trap that he’s fashioned into a trip mine with black powder and duct tape he’s scrounged up.

“Like the sound ‘o that,” Ghost encourages.

“Fashioned a trip mine,” Soap clarifies, reminding himself that this is the first time Ghost is having this conversation.

“A man after my own heart.”

“Thought you’d like that.”

“You thought right,” Ghost hums appreciatively.

Soap feels himself blush like he’s a kid in the schoolyard and not a soldier in guerilla warfare.

Soap updates him when he enters the coffee shop, this one is new to this loop so Ghost’s joke takes him by surprise, but he feels like, in retrospect, it really shouldn’t have.

“Get us a tea,” Ghost says and Soap is becoming super-humanly good at finding the smile in his flattest tones.

“Fuckin’ Brits,” Soap scoffs as he digs for more materials.

“You’re gonna owe me for this,” Soap says after a pause.

“Why?” Ghost asks and he sounds genuinely curious. Soap is starting to realize how he says things because of the time loop, which is definitely not fair seeing as how his only conversation partner isn’t in on it.

Soap shrugs. “We’re fixing each other’s problems.”

“What’s my problem?” Ghost asks and Soap can imagine him leaning forward and resting his chin on his hand. He knows he isn’t because he’s in his sniper position, but it’s a fun visual.

“The mask... take it off...” and maybe it’s a bit forward and said a bit too earnestly, but if Ghost reacts badly he can always unalive and start the loop over. He wonders when he became so loose about the idea of dying but seeing as how he’s pretty sure this is loop fifteen the question kind of answers itself.

“Show my face?”

“Yes sir.”

“Negative,” it sounds a bit harsh, but Soap can tell Ghost is playing along so he keeps the ball rolling.

“Are you ugly?” he asks with a smile.

“Quite the opposite.”

“I doubt that,” Soap says but he doesn’t mean a single goddamn word of it.

Soap messes around for a bit longer before moving on. He’s remembered to take this stim this time so his skin itches with a weird kind of energy that makes him feel untouchably powerful and like a paranoid chihuahua at the same time. He can hear Shadows combing the area and he doesn’t relish being there when they arrive. He reassesses his collection of random items, leaves a few trip mines as a gift, and clears out.

“Johnny... town’s full o’ tunnels,” Ghost states and this is new to the

loop too.

“Oh?”

“One leads out across from the church. Be advised- the tunnel is flooded. Prepare for a cold swim.”

“Can’t wait,” Soap grumbles, but he is glad for the added direction, it makes his wandering around and getting killed feel like it’s actually amounting to something.

That feeling holds until he gets shot in the back of the head about ten feet from the tunnel.

He’s shot twice more trying to get to the tunnels.

He’s exhausted and so fucking frustrated, but at least he gets to find brand new ways to joke with Ghost each loop.

Loop twenty-something is officially the worst in his book, maybe only second to being stabbed to death in number four.

He makes it all the way into the tunnels. The church plaza is just on the other side.

“I’ve got Shadows in body armor.”

“You’ll have to get in close,” Ghost advises. Soap once again simply lets him say things that logically Soap already knows. “Find the gaps.”

“Rog,” Soap replies before setting off.

He’s doing decently, sneaking around, taking the Shadows by surprise. It’s just one that reacts quicker than Soap expected and what should have been an easy enough dispatch just becomes a wrestling match. A wrestling match that ends with Soap’s head underwater, a gloved hand digging into his wounded shoulder, and his hands pushing and legs kicking ineffectively, desperately trying to get his face above the water line.

It can’t have taken that long, but it feels like an eternity that his lungs burn before his body gives out.

Soap wakes up choking and sputtering on water that isn't in his lungs.

He goes through the motions with ruthless efficiency, barely giving Ghost any responses through the radio, just enough so that Ghost doesn't worry about him laying dead somewhere. He doesn't joke and Ghost must pick up on it because the half-a-dog joke doesn't even make a showing.

Soap shivers as he approaches the tunnels but he forcefully turns off that part of his brain and slides into the frigid water.

He makes it out of the tunnel and he can see the church, he is so fucking close. He takes a turn down an alley and is prying a door open only for a Shadow to be on the other side when it swings open. The guy knocks Soap onto his back before reaching for his radio.

"All Shadow stations. Got one near the church-"

If the guy had anything more to say it's cut off by a bullet to the back just as Graves is responding "kill him."

"Holy hell," Soap says and it's the first thing he's said this whole loop that wasn't straight information for Ghost. "Ghost- was that you?"

"Who else? Now go."

Soap gets himself up and sets out. Shadows are converging on the area, but at least Soap has a gun that he can put to good use.

"Johnny," Ghost says and Soap feels his heart sink as he hears gunfire in the transmission. "Got company in the church and they're not here for forgiveness. Get to the steps, I'll be there."

Soap makes it all the way to the steps, he can see the distant figure of Ghost running towards the gate between the two of them, pursued by two Shadows. He lifts his gun to take care of Ghost's tails and forgets to watch himself until he hears the shot and feels the bullet imbed in his lower spine, but then it's too late. He's been shot. *Again.*

"Soap!" Ghost yells as Soap's gun falls from his hands and he collapses against the stone steps.

Ghost climbs over the gate and grunts as a bullet gets him in his leg, but he gets over to Soap's side. Soap is out of it, but he is aware that

he isn't actively dying right that moment which is actually worse.

Ghost is firing at anything that moves.

"Simon..."

"Hey Johnny, hold in there. We're gonna get out of here."

"Ghost, you gotta shoot me."

Ghost makes a sound like he's just been stabbed. "I'm not doing that."

This is definitely mounting up to be the loop in which Soap has treated Ghost the worst, icing him out for something that wasn't even his fault and then having the gall to get injured in front of him *and* demanding Ghost put him down like a lame horse. Certified asshole behavior.

"I cannae walk, sir. You can't let them capture me." because then the loop won't start again for who knows how long if ever. Maybe if he lives through this day that's it, no more loop. He doesn't know, but he can't chance it, this would be the worst loop to actually stick.

"I'm not going to. I'm getting you out of here."

"Yer gonna carry my heavy ass?"

"If I have to," Ghost responds almost primly, enunciating each word as if Soap is an idiot.

"Dinnae be an eejit."

"You're the idiot right now, I'm not putting you down like a dog."

In the end, Ghost doesn't shoot him. Soap distracts him enough that a Shadow is able to get in close before Ghost trades fire with him. Soap catches a stray and he would be thankful for it if he wasn't completely sure that Ghost would blame himself all the same.

Chapter End Notes

I am absolutely putting him through it, I am so sorry Soap ~(\n ~)

Hope you're liking it so far! It should be only one more chapter (edit: I lied, 4 chapters not 3!) and then done. I will be posting it as soon as possible. Thanks to anyone who leaves kudos and

comments, I love hearing what y'all think!

Loop 20 something - ??

Chapter Summary

Ghost dies a couple of different ways. Soap dies too. Things generally kind of suck.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Soap wakes up on all too familiar cobblestones with misty eyes. He hates everything and everyone with all his heart. He clicks his radio off before he can hear Ghost's voice.

He pushes himself up to his feet and gives his well-trod path a weary look before he turns in the other direction, headed back the way he came. He doesn't know what he thinks will happen or what he hopes to achieve, he's heading away from any allies that aren't in custody, and even if he gets through the wall of Shadows making their way through Las Almas that just leaves him in utter wilderness, but something under his skin is itching and he needs to do something different, if only this once.

He makes it a decent chunk of the way before he remembers that he'll eventually collapse without adrenaline. He keeps going.

He's gunned down at the edge of town by one of the vehicles rolling into Las Almas.

He's beginning to sort his loops into "Actual Attempts" (where he... well, it's in the name isn't it?) and "Null" (where he just gathers information or tries random shit for the sake of it).

Ghost doesn't like Null loops, he's constantly urging Soap to keep moving forward and not get held up. Ghost never remembers them by the next loop so it's alright. Soap is starting to feel a bit numb, but it's that kind of numbness that follows immediately after a broken bone, so he knows he's liable to snap out of it at any moment... and then probably have a mental breakdown about the whole thing.

Null loops have gotten Soap information about Shadow movement on the perimeter (and a shot to the head), the code to a safe (and a shot

to the head), and the exact location of every useful item to be found in the shops and back alleys (oh and multiple shots to the head).

This one is an Actual Attempt loop.

“Soap- you making progress?” Ghost asks randomly as Soap is exiting the maze of back alleys.

Soap swears that the guy must have a sixth sense about these loops because he always seems to be more concerned about keeping Soap moving in the loops following a Null loop. Soap knows it’s because he doesn’t live long enough in the Null loops for Ghost to get antsy, but it feels deeper anyways.

“Aye,” Soap grumbles. “Gettin’ there.”

“Two goldfish are in a tank...?” It’s a complete non-sequitur, but it’s not the first time Ghost has decided to shuffle in random jokes to lift the mood.

“Go on.”

“One turns to the other and says ‘Do you know how to drive this thing?’ Little army humor.”

“Very little,” Soap replies, but he huffs out a laugh anyways so he knows that he’s only encouraged Ghost.

“Another?”

“Why not,” Soap agrees easily. He could listen to Ghost make shit jokes all day.

“Why don’t blind guys skydive?”

Soap knows the answer to this one, but he doesn’t want to spoil Ghost’s fun. “Tell me.”

“Scares the shit out o’ their dogs,” Ghost says and Soap can hear the smile. “We can do this all night.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Soap is closing in on the tunnels and no matter how many times he goes through it the shock of the frigid water hurts all the same and the memory of having his head held under makes him twitchy, so he keeps the conversation going just to take his mind off the phantom

pain of ice cold water filling his lungs.

“One of these days, you and I are going to have a serious conversation about your issues with dogs,” Soap teases as he slips into the cold water. “Creepin’ Jesus,” he hisses as the ice water makes it into his boots and through his pants.

“You’ll have to make it here alive then,” Ghost states.

Soap groans. “Don’t I know it,” he complains even though Ghost doesn’t know about the loops and from his perspective things are going pretty swimmingly. Pun intended.

Soap wades deeper into the water, letting the current do half the work to drag him through the tunnel. He mostly avoids the Shadows where he can, killing the others as quietly as possible. No matter how many loops he goes through the water is still numbingly cold and his shoulder still throbs with pain whenever he exerts himself.

The same Shadow as last time makes an attempt to drown him when Soap gets in too close and doesn’t move fast enough. He’s ready for it this time though, keeping his hand gripped tightly around Ghost’s knife that he picks off that one Shadow’s corpse every time.

He drives it into the man’s arm and the pained surprise is enough for Soap to wrestle free, gasp for air, yank the knife out, and drive it into the man’s carotid artery all before he has time to recover.

Soap pulls himself sulkily out of the water. This is his fourth time getting through the tunnels completely. He still hasn’t actually seen Ghost past that one time.

“Can I offer you a joke?” Ghost asks.

“If you must,” Soap complains with no bite to his words at all.

“What do you call a dog with no legs?”

“There you go again with the dog jokes.”

“I know how much you like them,” Ghost says with a hint of sarcasm and a smirk.

“Alright then, what is it?”

“Well it doesn’t really matter does it, he’s not coming.”

Soap groans. "That was yer worst one yet."

He ducks behind a car he knows is relatively safe to assess his supplies and options. He hasn't gone back through the building since he got damn lucky with Ghost's sniper skills and he's not sure if that guy making the call about finding Soap triggers the Shadows chasing Ghost or not. He always dies before he gets to find out.

"Want another then?"

"Actually, I have one for you."

"Let's hear it."

Soap checks his gun last. It seems in fine condition.

"Why don't shrimp share?"

"Why?"

"Because they're a little shellfish," Soap says with a smile. He swears Ghost just might actually laugh on the other end.

"Not bad."

"Quite the opposite," Soap does in a mock of their earlier mask conversation because that's another one he can't help but have over and over again.

Soap has tried a mad dash across the plaza. He's tried different backways. The only attempt that has worked is the first one so that's what he takes and braces himself for being knocked on his ass. There's no way around it since he has to pry the door open.

He's knocked back and the guy levels a gun at him and reaches for his radio. He sends out his broadcast before Ghost shoots and Graves commands that the guy kill Soap.

"Thanks, Ghost," he groans as he gets back up to his feet and stretches his aching body.

"Anything for you, Johnny. Now go," Ghost states gruffly.

Soap clears his path better than he did last time. There are still Shadows converging on the area, but it's something. It doesn't take long before he hears from Ghost again.

“Johnny,” Ghost says and Soap can tell he’s already running from the way he’s breathing. “Got company in the church and they’re not here for forgiveness. Get to the steps, I’ll be there.”

Soap gets to the steps, clearing behind him before heading towards where he knows Ghost will be running. It doesn’t take long to spot him and the stress and relief of finally arriving at this moment threatens to knock Soap down.

“Ghost!”

“Soap!”

Ghost launches himself over the gate as Soap fires at the Shadows trailing behind him. Bullets ping off of the wrought iron, but none make their way into Soap’s back or Ghost’s leg, which he is infinitely grateful for.

Ghost recovers himself quickly and begins booking it down the stone steps.

“We need a vehicle, on me!”

Soap follows immediately, without hesitation.

“Stay sharp. They know we’re here and they know it’s us,” he doesn’t say that it’s Soap’s fault for not stopping the message from going out. “They’ll send more.”

“Contact- dead ahead,” Soap warns as he exchanges fire with a couple of Shadows.

“I see ‘em,” Ghost says and he sounds dangerous.

They keep moving. Firing in front of and behind themselves as they run, but they don’t stop. Somehow they both seem to get the feeling that that would be the nail in the coffin.

“Johnny, stay close. Heads up for a vehicle we can take.”

It’s not long before Ghost is speaking again, pointing out a pickup truck with its lights still on. Soap takes off towards it. They have to push the dead owner out in order to take it and Soap feels a little bad, but he’s mostly just amazed neither of them is dead.

“Alright, Johnny- you made it,” Ghost says and he sounds pleased.

“We made it, L.T.” Soap responds with a smile and it’s a heady sort of achievement. He almost feels light-headed from it all.

The thought is interrupted by gunfire from behind them. Soap immediately turns to shoot back.

“Hold fast!” Is the only warning he gets before Ghost throws the truck in reverse and backs up over the Shadows.

“That’s one way o’ doing it!” Soap says with a laugh in his voice.

The laugh dies as his eyes catch on movement over Ghost’s shoulder, but he’s already too late. The shot goes off and Ghost slumps to the side, towards Soap.

He freezes, his fight or flight response fully stuck on ‘*what???*’

His face is wet, he realizes. His mouth tastes like metal. He’s died enough times to be intimately aware of the taste and feeling of blood, but this time it isn’t his. It’s *Ghost’s*.

Simon’s blood is in his mouth.

He can’t move. His eyes are blown wide, staring directly at the bleeding crater in Ghost’s skull mask, or, well, in Ghost’s skull.

“No,” he mumbles and it sounds so fucking hollow, even to his own ears.

A hand grabs him by the collar and pulls him backwards and he realizes that they haven’t shot him. They’re going to try and take him into custody. Something about his back hitting the paving stones breaks him out of his trance and the feeling of shock is replaced by *anger*.

The numb feeling is gone. Here’s the break he’s been predicting for himself for a couple of loops now.

He lashes out at the closest Shadow and drags him down to the ground with him. He still has Ghost’s knife on him (he never got to return it, his mind adds more fuel to the fire) and he swings it down wildly. He is not aiming and he is not thinking and, perhaps the cardinal sin in the Ghost Handbook, he’s not being efficient at all.

But it’s fine.

Five stab wounds to the chest and neck all in quick succession and the

guy is probably dead on the second. The other Shadows are still reeling, but they're getting themselves together now. Soap picks himself up and launches at the next guy.

It's fine. Because he will not be surviving this.

Even if he could, some part of him that can still think thinks, he wouldn't. This can't be the loop that sticks.

This can't be the loop that sticks.

This can't be the loop that sticks.

He repeats it in his head like a mantra as he carves bloody revenge. Repeats it over and over and over again until a bullet to the back of the head silences it.

He wakes on cold, wet cobblestones and pushes himself up to his feet. He stares at the all too familiar surroundings for just a moment.

"Soap- This is Ghost. How copy?" A very much alive Ghost asks through the radio.

Soap doesn't open his communication channel. He doesn't respond at all. He just screams in frustrated rage.

It feels good, in a purging sense. Every emotion that he's felt since the beginning of this, that he's tamped down over the course of however many days worth of time this all adds up to be, that he's tried to redirect, they all come bubbling up to the surface. It feels good so he keeps screaming.

He feels more feral than human, but it feels good to let it all out.

He screams until a Shadow comes and shoots him.

He wakes not too far from where he died. The emotions have been purged by all the screaming and it leaves him feeling cold, ruthless, and vengeful.

He turns his radio off and tosses it to the ground as he gets up.

He heads towards Graves's voice. He's saying the same shit Soap has

had to listen to a thousand times, to the point where he thinks it might be printed on the inside of his eyelids it's so fucking familiar, but whereas hearing Ghost say the same thing over and over again comes with a certain warming feeling Soap doesn't care to explain, Graves's voice holds no such position.

It actually isn't too hard to find a Shadow loose on the edge of the concentrated area and he silences them with the same cold efficiency everyone purports to fear in Ghost. He takes their gun.

He creeps closer, ducking behind cars and planters until he can finally see Graves with his stupid little smirk. Soap cracks his neck and stands up, walking forward and leveling his gun at Graves who turns to him with a mildly surprised look.

The Shadows around him point their guns at Soap, but they don't fire, waiting for some guidance from Graves.

"This is all yer fault," Soap snarls.

Graves doesn't look scared, but then again he's probably leaning on the assumption Soap will try and make it out of this situation alive. He holds his hands up like he's calming an angry toddler. "Hey, I told you we could do it the easy way. I tried to play nice, but you and Scarface wouldn't take me up on it."

Soap knows the rumors about what's under Ghost's mask. He knows what Graves is referencing. The reminder of Ghost, especially one said so callously, is all he needs to push over the edge.

"Eat shit," Soap states evenly and fires.

His aim is true and the bullet ends up right between Graves's eyes.

Soap gets to appreciate the look of surprise on his face and the blood splatter for a couple of seconds before one of the Shadows gets their head out of their ass and shoots him.

Soap feels just a little bit healed when he wakes up face down on the cobblestones. He knows nothing has actually changed, but it felt good to get back at Graves. He doesn't want to know what a therapist might have to say about all that.

He jokes with Ghost again as he makes his way over. He calls Simon a

good ol' boy, asks him to take off the mask, and laughs at his two-fish-in-a-tank joke, the whole nine yards.

"It's pishin' it doon out here," Soap grumbles as he gets closer to the tunnels. Adding all the loops together he hasn't been dry in days. He swears he'll never go swimming willingly again. He is firmly in the realm of sandcastle-builder for any future beach vacations, no more surf for him.

"Speak English."

"It's rainin' fuckin' hard," Soap responds in a mocking tone.

"Then say so."

"I did!"

Ghost sighs in a way that reminds Soap of a mom shaking her head at a moody teenager.

"Rain's good, it'll cover your tracks."

"Covers theirs too," Soap grouses, just in case the moody teenager comparison wasn't apt enough.

"Let's worry about you, Johnny."

"So you do like me?" Soap asks and he's shifted from moody teenager to bordering flirtatious.

Maybe it's desperation, but he smiles when Ghost grumbles that he likes him *alive*. He could have just said no or not responded, Soap's brain argues.

He makes it all the way past the tunnels, shoots the guy when he's knocked to the ground (but not before the call can be made), and makes it all the way to the church. Soap goes for a different vehicle, hoping that change might save them any issues. There's a Shadow inside the vehicle so that's a hard no.

Ghost takes a bullet to the face before Soap can get a shot off. He looks broken the way he's laid out on the pavement and Soap wonders distantly if this is what his body looks a bit like every time he dies.

Soap sits at his side until a Shadow puts him out of his misery.

So his second wind was short-lived, he thinks as he lays *on the same damn cobblestone*, and what of it?

He doesn't even have rage like he did last time, he's just so fucking tired. He's not sure he can mentally handle Ghost dying again.

He thought it was bad having to listen to Ghost try and deal with his impending deaths, but now he's the mourner and it's so much worse. He would go through loop four and loop twenty-something (both still his top worst deaths) over and over a thousand times if it meant Ghost could just not fucking *die*.

Soap can't do this shit again. He's trying to think of a way to make sure Ghost survives. He's reached the point of not really caring where that lands him as long as Ghost survives and the loop sticks.

"Soap- This is Ghost. How copy?"

Soap touches his shoulder and, yep, still fucking hurts. He sits on the edge of the road and sighs wearily.

"Johnny? Johnny... how copy?"

"I'm here," Soap responds finally.

"Thought we lost you."

"I don't stay lost for long," Soap says and the words taste bitter to him.

Whether Ghost can make sense of that statement or not, he doesn't comment on it.

"You injured?" Ghost asks and there's a thought. All the times he's talked to Simon in the loops, he's never once been straightforward about his injuries.

"Yeah, took a bullet."

"Where?"

"Does it really matter? I'm bleeding and I'm definitely down major points in the usefulness department. You need to cut bait and clear out."

"I'm not that easy to get rid of, Johnny. Dust yourself off, I'll RV with you at the church, I'm headed that way now."

“You’re not listening, Ghost. You need to get out of Las Almas, no rendezvous. I’m not making it that far and you’ll just get caught waitin’ fer me.”

“You’re real chatty for someone who’s trying to pass it off like they’re dying,” Ghost says and he sounds angry.

“I’m bein’ realistic, Simon. There’s a sea of mercs between us. I’m not makin’ it in the shape I’m in,” it’s not wholly true, but he’s hoping a bit of hyperbole will finally convince Ghost. It doesn’t.

“Then I’ll come to you,” Ghost says it so easily like the matter’s settled.

“No. Get out of Las Almas. I’ll hole up somewhere and do my best to not get caught or bleed out.”

“Tell me your location,” Ghost uses his commanding voice and Soap sighs in annoyance.

“Get out of Las Almas.”

With that Soap clicks the radio over to the Shadows’ channel. He heads over to one of the houses that has already been cleared and takes a knife from the kitchen before heading to the bathroom and doing his best patch-up job with what’s at hand.

He’s hoping that between the patch-up and almost zero exertion he’ll be able to get by without the stim. He lays down in the bathtub with the kitchen knife close enough to grab if he has to and the radio laying on his stomach and daydreams to waste time.

He’s not exactly sure how much time has passed, but he knows that Ghost should have cleared out of Las Almas or at the very least be well past the church when the radio crackles with one of the Shadow’s voices.

“Got one in the shopping plaza.”

Soap feels like his heart has stopped. They have to be talking about a loose narco or a dirty cop, Ghost should have Las Almas to his back by now, he definitely shouldn’t be anywhere near the shopping plaza.

“Dead?” Graves asks.

“Had to kill him, sir. He was tearing through my guys.”

“Which one was it?”

“The Ghost, sir. Said he was looking for the Scott, so I’m guessing Lucky Charms is still in the wind.”

Soap is too wrecked to even care that the Shadow confused the Scots and Irishmen.

“Congrats Long, you just killed one of the scariest motherfuckers known to man.”

Soap turns off the radio and restarts the loop.

He tries his ‘hole up and get Ghost out of Las Almas’ plan again, but this time he doesn’t answer his radio at all, let’s Ghost think he’s collapsed or dead in some random back alley or street.

He feels bad about it, but if his plan works out he and Ghost will both be alive at the end of this and he will find his way back to Simon and apologize for any worries. Getting Ghost out of Las Almas is all he can think of, he’ll grovel later if he must.

Despite giving no signs that he’s still alive, Ghost apparently looks for him. The Shadows on the radio claim to get him in the alley behind the bar, they suffered casualties to do it, but they killed him. The operative reporting in this time is named Hendricks.

Soap goes after Graves again and gets shot down after putting two in the jerk’s skull, just to blow off steam.

Soap wakes up on the same cobblestone as always.

Since Ghost has apparently decided to lose his mind and break every rule Soap knows about him by doubling back, Soap doesn’t have a choice but to play along. He’s had enough Null loops now to know pretty much every diverging path and not a single one of them has either of them living longer than the loops where he does as Ghost asks and tries to RV at the church.

It doesn’t mean he isn’t pissed as hell.

At Ghost, yes, because what great bloody idiot galavants around a warzone looking for a man who isn’t even responding to his radio?

Sure he's *the Ghost* but, if nothing else, these past few loops have proved he dies just the same when you shoot him.

But he's also pissed at the time loops. He doesn't understand why he is being punished (and he's certain that it is a punishment, listening to Ghost try and comfort him, dying a thousand times over, and watching Ghost die). He doesn't understand why the loop has to start here, face down on some random street with a bullet already in his shoulder, after he has already radioed that he's alive and in the blind. Why couldn't it start before Graves's betrayal? Maybe then he could actually do something effective to save everyone.

It's the first time in a while that he's let himself think about the moment of betrayal. He shivers as he remembers Ghost's voice yelling for him to get out of there, remembers meeting Ghost's eyes for just a moment as he was laying on the ground before he went over the railing and slid down the hill, remembers the sort of desperation that had been there. Even before these goddamn loops Ghost had been there, trying to get him out.

"Soap- This is Ghost. How copy?"

"You have no idea how glad I am to hear your voice, L.T." Soap responds earnestly because why not? Chances are this loop won't be the end anyways.

"I could say the same," Ghost responds and Soap heaves himself up onto his feet. "Thought I lost you there for a moment."

Soap doesn't miss the shift from 'we' to 'I', but he doesn't comment on it either, just in case it shuts Ghost down. There's an honesty between them right now and in a split-second decision Soap chooses to make this the most honest loop yet.

"You injured?" Ghost asks.

"Yeah, bullet in the shoulder, if I dinnae get my hands on a stim then I'll collapse, and either I bleed out or I get offed by a Shadow that notices my unconscious body is still breathin', I'm not sure which because I'm too unconscious to tell."

"What?"

"I'm stuck in a time loop."

"Pardon?"

“Don’t get British about this, I know it doesn’t make sense, but I have repeated the same thirty minutes to an hour of my life multiple times over... sometimes way less when I’m really stupid.”

“What happens when you’re really stupid?” Ghost asks.

Soap is tempted to tell him he can figure that one out from context, but instead he just shrugs. “Bullet, usually.”

“Fine. Supposin’ I believe you-”

“And you do... for some reason,” Soap states because he can tell in Ghost’s tone, he does.

“And I do,” Ghost agrees. “For some reason. Why do you have a bullet in the arm? Shouldn’t you have figured out how to avoid that after the first time around?”

“Because the loop starts here. We’re still in the first five minutes.”

Soap begins moving, he’s going to have to walk and talk if he wants to get his timing right.

“Shit,” Ghost states, eloquently.

“Yeah, shit.”

“How many times...?”

“Lost track. I’m in my thirties now... I think.”

“How do the loops restart?” And that’s something that Soap has always appreciated about Ghost, he’s immediately in his efficiency mode, collecting information.

“I think you can guess.”

“Have you survived the whole night yet?”

Soap grimaces, knowing the answer is going to upset Ghost. Ghost won’t let it show, of course, but Soap is now intimately aware of the various tones of silence Ghost leaves between them when Soap tells him things. He can’t avoid the question though, it’s too direct.

“Nah,” Soap says, trying to sound casual. He thinks he should probably tell Ghost he’s getting closer or something else at least mildly reassuring, but after multiple loops of Ghost dying on him he’s not

feeling very optimistic and he knows that it would show in his voice if he tried.

The silence on the other end is grim and sullen, as predicted.

“Graves is on a power trip, but you’ll be safe in the church until a Shadow almost gets me after the tunnels and sends out our location. I get the hard part up til then.”

“What if I come to you?”

“No,” Soap says quickly and it’s too harsh, just this side of a yell, and only because he remembered he’s supposed to be sneaking around.

“I assume I’ve asked that question before?”

“Mh... somethin’ like it,” Soap replies vaguely, distracting himself by gathering supplies.

“How many times have we had this conversation?”

“Oh, uh...” Soap feels himself blushing red. “This is actually the first.”

“The first?” Ghost’s voice rings just a little hollow.

“... yeah.”

“You’ve been through thirty or more loops and this is the first time you’ve told me?”

Soap can’t place exactly what emotions Ghost is going through and it’s been so long since he couldn’t tell that it throws him off his game for just a moment. Ghost sounds angry, which he expected, but he also sounds horribly sad, a bit sulky, and something else that he can’t even *begin* to place.

“To be fair, I was expecting a lot more resistance to the idea of a goddamn *time loop*.”

“Do you just let me say the same things over and over again? How do you put up with that?”

“Usually I just let you go on, I’ve got most of our conversations memorized by this point,” Soap admits. “I like talkin’ to you, L.T. Don’t make it sound like it’s some great sacrifice.”

There’s silence for a moment and Soap digs through the last cabinet he

needs before getting up and stretching.

“How many times have we made it to each other?” And Ghost really is speed-running the top ten hits of things Soap Doesn’t Want To Talk About. Soap begins to think he might have been a bit forward back there, thinking he appreciated Ghost’s efficiency and information collecting.

“Three.”

“Last three cycles?”

“Nah,” Soap clears his throat awkwardly. “I was trying something new for the last two.”

“Didn’t work, I take it.”

Soap closes his eyes for just a moment, thinking back to laying in the tub with his shitty patch job and clutching the radio tightly. Long and Hendricks. If he had faces to put to the names he would have already memorized them.

“Yeah, it didn’t work.”

Soap is throwing his legs over the railing when he starts to feel like something is missing, it only takes him a moment to put together what it is.

“Hey, where’s my half-a-dog joke?”

“Sorry, your what?”

“The joke you tell every time I mention the big ass caged dog or you hear it barking over comms. Where’s my joke?!” Soap demands and he’s smiling, he feels more like himself than he has since loop four.

“Oh, you mean ‘what has two legs and bleeds?’ I was gonna say it if you ended up on the same path as me to make fun of you for bein’ squeamish. Do you actually like that joke?”

“Fuck nah, it’s the worst joke I’ve ever heard.”

“And yet, you’re asking for it.”

Soap drops into the gated alley and it still hurts. It hurts every fucking time.

“Well yeah, it’s become a staple. I do too many more of these loops and I’m gonna haf’ta ask you to say it every morning just so I can retain a sense of normalcy. You’ll be going on eighty and regrettin’ you ever thought it in the first place.”

“You think we’ll be in our seventies and still doing this shite?”

“If we’re not, I’m going to require you to break into my nursing home every mornin’ for the sake of it.”

“Nursing home by seventy?”

“What can I say? I don’t think the 141 is too gentle on the body.”

Soap makes it through the shopping plaza with no issues, that part is basically all muscle memory at this point. He retrieves Ghost’s knife as he always does (announcing it happily to Ghost), and gets his hands on a gun. He does have a close call in the back alleys, but he has his homemade smoke bombs on him and that works well enough to get him out of there.

He’s headed towards the adrenaline and generally complaining about things, mostly the rain, but also how spread out everything is. It’s nice to finally have Ghost understand the full breadth of the situation, it lets him complain without sounding completely annoying.

“Do you know I haven’t been dry since this shit began? I wake up on the street in the rain, walk around in the rain, when I make it to the tunnels I get to swim in bone-chilling water, and then at some point I die and I wake back up on the street in the rain. I’m never going outside in the rain again if I have a say.”

“I will personally warm a towel in the dryer for you if you can get your ass over here without dying,” Ghost promises.

“That would be deeply appreciated, L.T.”

He gets his hands on the stim and sets off toward the tunnels.

“Have I told you the two-fish-tank joke in any of these cycles?”

“Several.”

“Ah, a different one then?”

“You have also made the blind-skydiver and the call-a-legless-dog jokes, which reminds me that we still haven’t had a talk about your

obvious issues with dogs.”

“You’re really stifling my creativity here, Soap, but I think I have another one.”

“‘Bout a dog?”

“Unfortunately no, but I’ll come prepared with more next time we get mutinied.”

“Alright, let’s hear it then.”

“String walks into a bar,” Ghost starts and does his signature pause to make sure Soap is paying attention.

“Go on.”

“The bartender says ‘oi, we don’t serve your kind here’ and the string leaves the bar disappointed.”

“Okay?”

“He twists himself up, ruffles his ends, and then heads back in. The bartender says ‘hey, aren’t you that string from earlier?’ and the string says ‘oh no sir, I’m a frayed knot.’”

“Boo, that was awful.”

“You know, like ‘afraid not’ ‘frayed knot’.”

“I say this with deep respect,” Soap states, completely sarcastically. “I think you are getting worse.”

“Oh, then I want to hear what you’ve got.”

“Why don’t shrimp share?”

“Why?”

“Cus they’re a little shellfish.”

He can actually hear Ghost huff out a laugh on the other end.

“That’s not fair, you’ve had thirty-something cycles to pick the best joke.”

“I think you just have shit taste in jokes,” Soap states before sliding

into the water for the tunnels. “Creepin’ Jesus, the water is *sae pumpin’ cauld!*”

“Could you be more Scottish?” Ghost asks, bemused.

“Probably. Why? Should I translate it into Proper British English for you?”

“You could try.”

Soap is smiling before he even starts.

He throws on his worst imitation of an Oliver Twist voice. “Blimey, I do say, this wa’er is pure bloody cold, innit?”

“Nevermind,” Ghost responds decisively. “You should never say any o’ that ever again.”

Soap laughs. “Ok, ok, now be quiet. I need to be focused when this guy tries to drown me.”

It sucks just as much as it usually does, Soap’s toes are numb by the time he pulls himself out on the other side. They RV at the church steps as always.

“You’ve been here before, what’s the play?” Ghost says in lieu of a greeting and Soap realizes with a jolt that Ghost is handing command to him.

“No military vehicles, there’s no way of knowing which one’s have Shadows in them and then you’re shot. There’s a pickup truck, lights still on, just lean back after you back it up or else you get shot. That’s the sum total of runs through here, so there’s stuff I can’t account for, just... just don’t die.”

“You better not die either.”

They have the pickup in sight when Soap hears Ghost grunt in pain. He turns wildly to see Ghost twist the arm of a Shadow dumb enough to throw a punch when Ghost got in close and Ghost slides a knife into his throat, dealing with the problem handily. The relief Soap feels is immediate and strong enough that he’s a bit embarrassed about the extent of his worry.

He’s so distracted that he isn’t aware of the Shadow coming around the corner right in front of him until they both collide. Soap is quick

enough on his feet to knock the gun out of the Shadow's hands, but unfortunately, the Shadow is pretty quick too and Soap is down his gun.

The Shadow pulls out a tactical knife and Soap moves quickly, tackling him before he can figure out what he's going to actually do with the knife. They grapple for it for a moment. It's not ideal, but it's looking alright for Soap because he's, at the very least, on top and seems to be the one with the slightly sharper reaction time.

Then the Shadow gets his arm free with room to swing and maybe he noticed the blood and the care Soap takes with his shoulder or maybe he just gets lucky. Either way, it feels like a hot poker of pain in his shoulder and Soap's vision whites out.

He comes back to himself as he's lying on his back with the Shadow above him. He knocks the knife from the Shadow's hand and it flies out of reach. This time the Shadow definitely aims for his shoulder and grinds the heel of his hand into the wound, making Soap's body freeze up for just a moment.

He can hear Ghost yelling his name and feels the Shadow's hands around his throat and his knee in his chest. His vision is darkening on the edges as he gains some control over himself again and does his best to try and push back, his hands sliding ineffectually against the Shadow's arms.

The weight suddenly lifts off of him as blood splatters across his face and the Shadow tips to the side.

Ghost is there, grabbing his hand to lift him up to his feet. "I told you *One Thing*."

"I know, I know. My bad," Soap says with a relieved smile, his voice sounds hoarse and absolutely wrecked.

A series of shots go off and Ghost reacts quickly, lifting his gun and firing back, ending the firefight with deadly aim, but not before a bullet catches him in the shoulder and in the stomach. He stumbles back and collapses to sit on the street.

"Shit!" Soap yells, scrambling to grab his fallen gun, kneeling at Ghost's side, and shooting another approaching Shadow.

With the streets quiet, at least for the time being, Soap turns to look at Ghost. Ghost reaches out and grabs Soap's arm, seeming to already

know Soap's thought process.

"Wait, Soap- Johnny, wait. Don't..." He seems to search for the words. "Don't restart just for me."

"You can't ask that of me," Soap says firmly.

"Ok, ok, just..." Ghost is still gripping his arm. "Give it a moment, I'm not dead yet."

"You aren't making it out of this and I'm in shit shape, I'll just do it all again and just add this to the list of shit to avoid."

It's everything that Ghost should appreciate, logical and sensible and removed. He doesn't seem to appreciate it though.

"You don't have to-"

"It isn't about *'have to'* you fucking bampot! I'm not letting you die, especially not when all I've got to do is just the last hour of my life over again."

"But it's not that, is it? It's the last hour of your life over and over again, *ad infinitum*. I can tell you're lowballing your cycles, they already add up to days worth of time. How long until it's weeks or years? You're going to do all that?"

"If I have to!" Soap immediately responds, no hesitation. "You're worth saving, Simon! Quit talkin' like ye aren't."

Ghost looks at him with wide, round eyes behind the skull mask. There's silence for a moment and Soap becomes aware that he is suddenly breathing like he just ran a marathon, his angry breaths the only thing filling the quiet. Ghost eventually blinks and looks down, cowed.

"I-" Soap collapses back onto his haunches. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. This is all my fault."

"No, it's not, you're trying your best."

Ghost's hand is still on his arm, though all the tenseness has drained, he's not holding Soap back and Soap isn't moving to do anything either, the gun held loosely in his grip.

"I have a request... it's selfish," Ghost says.

“Ask anyways.”

“Don’t... restart until I’m dead. Just, sit with me for a while.”

It’s easy to agree to. They sit together in the rain.

“You’ve died so many times trying to get here to RV with me,” Ghost says and he sounds a bit mystified. “Why?”

“I want us both to survive, sir. I tried sitting in one place or even going in the opposite direction a couple of times and apparently, even when I turned off my radio and refused to respond, you came looking for me and got yourself killed. *God*,” Soap still isn’t over it. Long and Hendricks and who knows who else since he knows those aren’t the only times he cut off communication with Ghost. “Why would you do that?”

“I think you can guess,” Ghost says, looking at him meaningfully.

Soap reaches out. His fingers find the edge of Ghost’s mask and linger there for a moment, giving Ghost well enough time to stop him. He raises the edge of the mask slowly, revealing pale skin, a stubbled chin, and a branching scar splitting across his lips like a bolt of lightning.

Soap leans in and kisses him softly. Simon’s hand goes up to the back of Soap’s head and pulls him in, deepening the kiss.

They eventually pull apart.

“I need you to promise me something,” Simon says, his tone serious.

“Not if it’s about dying.”

“It’s not.”

“Ok, anything then.”

“Tell me. No matter how many more you cycle through, please don’t stop telling me. Don’t bear it alone, let me help.”

“I will.”

Ghost is dead three minutes later. Soap is dead in three and a half.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, I have one more chapter! I promise things will eventually start working out Soap's way.

Soft Ghost, my beloved. Concerned Soap, my heart. They love each other, your honor!

Thank you for all the comments, I have been blown away by the reception for this, thank you guys so much!!! I hope you are enjoying it and I will see you in the next (and last) chapter!

Loop ?? - The End

Chapter Summary

Feelings are talked about. Soap and Ghost finally make it to the safe house.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Soap keeps his promise. He tells Ghost about the loops, warns him about the Shadows that will chase him once Soap gets on the other side of the tunnels, and jokes with him about the whole thing.

He doesn't tell him about the kiss.

He keeps things light, as much as he can. He knows that he's not that good at it and that Ghost can read right between the lines, but he tries his best to brush the cycle of deaths off like it's not really a big deal.

He doesn't tell Ghost about loop 4 where he was stabbed to death and Ghost tried to soothe him or loop 20-something where he drowned. He doesn't tell Ghost about collapsing without the stim. He mentions killing Graves, but doesn't clarify. And he absolutely refuses to talk about the last three or four loops.

He can tell Ghost wants to ask, but he refrains. Ghost asks every other question under the sun trying to get as much information as possible, but he turns his questions in a new direction every time Soap goes silent or gets a bit cagey about answering. Soap is quietly thankful for it, but he does not point it out just in case that would be too close to saying Ghost has feelings.

He's in the bar when he decides to joke about drinks again, just so he can call Ghost a good ol' boy.

"You're going to owe me for this," Soap follows up, just like last time.

"For you playing Sisyphus while I play boulder? Probably."

Oh yeah, Ghost hadn't known about the loops last time.

"Nah, we're just fixing each other's problems," Soap responds with a shrug.

“Oh? What’s my problem?”

“The mask... take it off,” again, it feels too forward, too earnest, but he wants to say it anyways. He won’t mention the kiss, won’t push that onto him, but it has freed him to be a bit more serious when he jokingly flirts.

“Have I?” Ghost asks instead of the answer he expects and it throws him just a bit.

“What?”

“Have I taken off my mask... in any of the cycles where we reach each other?” There’s something in his tone that Soap can’t begin to place.

“Oh, uh... nah, not really. I mean, most of the deaths didn’t leave a lot of room for that kind of thing even if you actually wanted to do something like that and I promise, I never snuck a peek.”

“Oh.”

Again there’s something in the tone that Soap can’t quite put his finger on. He’s tempted to call it disappointment, but he can’t wrap his head around why that would be.

“What’s my problem?” Soap asks to change course slightly.

“What’s that?”

“My problem. We’re fixin’ each other’s problems so I need to have one too.”

“You’re the one who said there were problems in the first place, this is your hypothetical.”

“Oh come on, Simon, play along.”

“Well, your big, glaring problem right now is goin’ through the same hour or so over and over again. I don’t know how I can fix that one though.”

Not dying would be a start, a punishing part of his brain whispers, but he doesn’t voice it.

“Alright then, what can you fix?”

“You’re absolutely shit at doing a chokehold. After we RV and get out

of here, I can show you how it's done."

Soap's favorite thing is that Ghost really, actually means it. No innuendo intended.

"I look forward to it, sir," Soap says with a laugh.

He puts the finishing touches on a few of his trip mines as they talk.

"I'm leaving some gifts for our friends, they might light some shit up."

"Wouldn't expect any less from you," Ghost says, and Soap smiles.

"Ah, I'm just putting off gettin' into that freezing cold water."

"It's not that bad."

"It's exactly that bad, you radge. I feel it in my bones, I'm never going to be warm or dry again," Soap bemoans dramatically.

"Right."

"Fine, I can see I will receive no sympathy. I'm on my way," Soap huffs, equally dramatically to his last statement. He swears he can hear Ghost roll his eyes on the other end.

The water is exactly that bad.

Soap and Ghost shoot the Shadow that knocks Soap down at the same time.

"Fuck, I got blood on my damn face again," Soap complains as he forces himself back up to his feet.

"You haven't found a better way through here than that one?" Ghost asks in a tense tone.

"Uhh... no. But your timing is always impeccable and I'm getting better at it. Any other way just gets me killed outright."

"Ok then," Ghost says, still seeming kind of grumpy about it, but he doesn't say anything else.

"You should probably get movin' out of the church now, I'll meet you at the steps per usual."

"Copy. RV at the steps."

Soap makes it to the steps as Ghost does, shooting down his tails that are now trailing at more of a distance than before.

“What’s the play?” Ghost asks brusquely.

“White pickup with the lights still on, lean back after you’ve backed up. No military vehicles, avoid them. If I get pinned by a Shadow help from a *distance*, don’t come over to me. Our best bet is to stay close together.”

Ghost stiffens up slightly as he listens to the list, his eyes serious. Then they’re running.

They make it to the pickup this time and Soap can’t help but give a preliminary sigh of relief, but they aren’t done yet. He pulls the dead owner out of the truck as Ghost climbs into the driver’s seat.

He’s already turned around and firing at the approaching Shadows before they get a shot off. Ghost still backs up over them and it would almost be funny if it didn’t put Soap’s heart in his throat.

“Lean back,” he barks immediately, turning and firing across the cab of the truck at the Shadow approaching from the side.

Another Shadow somewhere over Soap’s shoulder fires and it pings against the truck, right next to the window.

Ghost slams on the gas and they take off.

“Any other advice?” Ghost asks.

“Nope, we just passed the last thing I knew.”

Ghost, despite being quite smart, seems to finally put together what Soap’s advice meant. He glances over his shoulder for just a moment. Soap wonders if he was just too focused on getting through or if he actively didn’t want to think about it, both seem fair honestly.

“Ah, ‘lean back’,” he says softly and Soap knows he understands.

“Yeah,” Soap says and sits in silence for a minute. “So where are we headed?”

“Alejandro has a safe house, he gave me the location.”

“Why didn’t he tell me?” Soap pouts only slightly.

“It was need to know.”

“What if I needed to know?!”

“I’m telling you now.”

“Awh, away n’ bile yer heid,” Soap grumbles.

“Sounds unpleasant,” Ghost comments which makes Soap chuckle instead.

“Don’t make me laugh when I’m trying to be grumpy.”

“Don’t think I’m funny,” Ghost replies.

Soap smiles and goes silent for a moment before speaking back up.

“You owe me a dry, warm, fluffy towel.”

“Why would I owe you that?”

“You promised me in a past loop that you’d warm my towel in the dryer personally if I got to you alive. I want my towel.”

“Well, if I even actually said that, I said it in a past loop and I don’t remember it so it doesn’t count.”

“That might be a good call, there’s a lot of stuff you did and said in the past loops.”

“Like what?” Ghost asks a bit too quickly, his voice just a bit too sharp.

“Ahh... suddenly I’m a big fan of yer Don’t Ask Don’t Tell policy on the past loops.”

“You can’t bring something up and then say *you* don’t want to talk about it.”

Soap blew a raspberry and flipped Ghost the bird, mostly playfully.

“I’m well-versed in torture methods.”

“Aye... as if you could bring yerself tae torture me,” Soap responds sleepily and he barely pays heed to Ghost tensing slightly as if he has been really called out. As if it would be a shock that he wouldn’t want to torture his own men. He thinks sometimes Ghost goes a little too

hard on the whole ‘unknowable’ schtick.

Soap leans back against the seat and his head lolls without him meaning to let it, he’s becoming aware that his body feels like jello.

Ghost must see the motion because suddenly one of his hands is on Soap’s shoulder and he is trying to look at him and the road at the same time.

“Johnny? Johnny, stick with me.”

“I think the stim is sportin’ aff.”

“You took a stim?”

“Och sorry, I forgot tae mention it.”

“Bloody christ, you had me worried for a moment,” Ghost says and he sounds pissed and relieved in equal measures, it’s jarring but Soap is too exhausted to think too hard about it.

“Nah, Ahm not dyin’ am just tired as hell.”

“I would scold you about your English but that was almost discernable.”

“I think ye just spend awfy much time wi’ me.”

“No, see, I’m losin’ it again.”

“It wasnae that hard tae ken,” but Soap does have to admit that extreme exhaustion has definitely deepened his accent and made the differentiation between English and Scotts difficult.

The truck rumbles over the uneven road and Soap finds himself tipping to the side. The truck is old so it sports a bench seat, which means there is no armrest to catch him, and if nothing caught him he would be laying flat on the seat. Instead, his head lands on a slightly damp, but warm mass and it takes him far too long to put together that it’s Ghost’s shoulder. It takes him even longer to feel like maybe he shouldn’t be leaning on Ghost, but by that point his body is too tired to move.

He doesn’t actually rest. His eyes don’t close. He thinks part of it is because he knows they aren’t fully in the clear yet and part of it is this deep-seated fear that if he lets his eyes drift closed the thing that will follow the darkness will be rain and cobblestones instead of the warm,

slightly bloody, cab of the truck.

The truck rolls to a stop and Ghost gently shakes Soap's shoulder.

"C'mon, we made it."

Ghost thankfully spots that the front door is rigged because Soap feels like his eyes are crossing. They find a little window off to the side and Ghost looks at Soap, who must look dead on his feet, and then up at the window.

"I'll lift myself in first and then help you if you need it, that way I can clear."

Soap is way too tired to argue it, but in retrospect, it's the exact wording of a sentence the universe is screaming at him to pay attention to.

Ghost lifts himself up and through the window frame easily. Soap refuses to have made it all this way just to be treated like an uncoordinated toddler so he's grabbed onto the window frame (which sends a painful jolt through his shoulder, just as a reminder) and he's working his way up and inside.

Ghost lands on the other side easily. Quiet as a cat. Instantly there's a red beam of light from the darkness, it lands on his chest. Ghost doesn't freeze, he jukes to the side and then charges into the room.

Soap collapses into the room, his whole body aching, but the exhaustion breaks immediately as the crack of gunfire echoes through the room. When Soap has finally struggled to his feet and silence has finally resumed he looks around the room.

Ghost lays on the floor, a pool of red spreading underneath him.

"No..." Soap breathes out, his voice is so quiet it's almost silent and it trembles. It trembles terribly. "No... Goddammit. Fuck. No."

He can't help but look around for the cause. His eyes trail around the room before landing on Rodolfo who has one of Ghost's throwing knives sticking out of his stomach and another embedded in the wall next to his head. His face is ashen, like all the color has been drained from it, but he isn't looking at either knife. He's staring dead straight at Ghost's crumpled form. For a moment Soap almost thinks he's dead but then he takes in a ragged breath and his eyelashes flutter just slightly, moisture beading on them.

"I- I... I'm so sorry. I- I didn't mean to. I didn't know. He- the light behind you... I couldn't see, I swear. I didn't- *mierda*. I didn't kn-know. I thought he was- I'm so sorry Soap."

Distantly, Soap is aware that he should say *something* in return, but for the life (and deaths) of him, he cannot imagine what he could possibly say in this situation.

"Damn it," he says and reaches for the pistol tucked into his waistband.

Rudy watches him with wide eyes.

"No no no, Soap, don't-"

Soap wishes he could say something that would make this all better, but he can't think of a single thing. Ghost is dead, Rudy's dying, and Soap needs to restart. In a matter of seconds, Rudy won't remember that any of this ever happened, it's the only kind thing Soap can do for his friends now.

"I'm sorry, hermano," and he hopes adding 'hermano' in is enough for Rudy to understand that he doesn't blame him. He can't explain it any better because there's a tightness in his chest and a burning behind his eyes and he can't stay here one second longer.

The first breath Soap takes as he wakes up mutates into a sob about halfway through. He chokes on it, coughing and hacking before he can't hold it back anymore. That pressure that's in his chest and that burning behind his eyes burst, like a wave breaking on the shore.

He gives up on trying to fight it at all and turns over, onto his back, and faces up at the rain pattering down on him.

"Soap- This is Ghost. How copy?"

Soap would like to try and answer, but he feels like he can't breathe. It's all just too much and the sound of Ghost's voice on top of it makes it so much worse.

It's the kind of crying reserved for movie characters having soul-wrenching breakdowns, teenagers after their first break-up, and toddlers in the grocery, and Soap would feel embarrassed if he gave a shit.

He hears Ghost call for him a few more times, but he is nowhere near calm enough to answer the radio. It's one thing to lay in the middle of the street sobbing, it is an entirely different thing to blubber over the radio to a Ghost that won't even understand the context.

"It's..." Ghost's voice hesitates for a moment. "It's ok, Johnny. If you can hear me I'm gonna come find you, just stay alive if you can."

That snaps Soap out of it just slightly and he sits up sharply. He can't let Ghost come looking for him, that's one of the growing multitudes of things that gets the big idiot killed. He's reaching for his radio to yell at Ghost to fucking leave and ask him what the fuck was wrong with him when he makes eye contact with a Shadow that had definitely heard him sobbing and followed the sound.

The poor Shadow has an expression on his face that is so strongly projecting *'oh my God this is really awkward'* that it actually makes Soap laugh. It's such a strangely human thing to experience from what should have been a faceless Shadow and what definitely was a man coming to kill him. The absurdity of it all really hits Soap and he's *definitely cracked*.

The Shadow's face shifts from one of embarrassment and awkwardness to just short of 'extremely disturbed' as Soap begins laughing harder. Soap wonders if the guy's ever seen a mental breakdown before because that is, for sure, what is happening right now.

Soap gets up to his feet and points at the Shadow, the absurd laughter shifting to a serious threat. "All of this shit is because of you lot. I'm aff to murder you, then I'm gonna murder Graves, and then Ahm gonna kill every motherfucking Shadow I can get my hands on."

The Shadow stares at him for a moment and then finally seems to get his wits about him and shoots- not just one bullet, but a round- right at Soap. It is now, officially, the shortest distance he has made before getting killed.

He slumps to the ground bleeding and his eyes fall closed.

Soap wakes up again- because of course he does- and he really is starting to think this might be the rest of his eternity.

"Soap- This is Ghost. How copy?"

“Everything sucks,” Soap hisses back into the radio.

“Tell me about it. You injured?”

Soap pushes himself up to his feet. “Yeah, I am, but don’t worry about that. It doesn’t matter this time.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Listen, I’m going to tell you something and you’re gonna be like ‘what is this numpty talking about’ but you’re also gonna believe me for some reason.”

“Ok.”

“I’m stuck in a time loop and I have completely lost track of how many days worth of time I’ve been doing this one hour of my life. And things have just really taken a turn for the worst for me so I’m going to be real honest with you here. I’m not fucking trying this loop. I’m gonna go to the bar and steal a bottle of tequila because I have been just trying for loops on end now and I need a fucking drink.”

“Soa-” Soap clicks the radio off and sets out.

He’s been through the motions leading up to actually getting in the bar so many times by this point that it’s almost all muscle memory. Though he does truly surprise himself by filling in all the conversations he should be having during those activities, but he’s not because he turned off his radio. He does feel kind of shitty about the whole thing, but that just makes him want to get to the bar and grab the first intact bottle he can reach.

The bar is quiet, none of the Shadows are particularly close by... yet. Soap picks up an almost full bottle of tequila and he knows it’s going to taste so bad because it’s cheap and he isn’t looking for any chasers, but that’s fine, this little detour isn’t about sipping on something delicious and so for that it will do the job just fine.

He decides to sit behind the bar so he’s not visible to any passing Shadows, extending the time he gets to take here just that bit longer. He huffs as he sits down and opens the bottle with his teeth.

He can feel the heat pooling in his chest and his cheeks already- though he’s not drunk yet, barely tipsy- when the door to the bar slams open. It is followed shortly by dead silence, accompanied only by the sound of someone breathing quietly. Soap holds his breath.

Maybe they will just move on so he can actually get drunk before he dies and the whole thing repeats.

“Soap?” A tense voice asks.

“Huh? Ghost?!” Soap asks peeking over the edge of the bar.

Ghost cuts quite the menacing figure looming in the doorway with the rain dripping off of him and his dark eyes boring out from behind the white skull, the only non-black part of his ensemble.

He looks almost pleased to see Soap for just a moment before his scowl comes back. “You turned your radio off on me.”

“Wouldna be the first time. What’re you doin’ here?”

“Came to get you.”

“Brilliant. Well, if ya hadn’t noticed on yer way here we’re surrounded by Shadows and it’s pishin’ it doon out there on top of everythin’ else, so I don’t really know why you put in all the effort to get here because there’s no way we’re goin’ anywhere now.”

“Yes. I had noticed that,” Ghost states flatly, he looks for all the world like a drenched and highly displeased cat.

Soap sighs. “I am sorry, Simon. I’m doing a shit job of this whole thing.”

Ghost looks down at him and his eyes soften slightly. “Scoot over, I’m joining you.”

Soap does so happily and offers him some of the tequila. Ghost takes it with a pinched face, lifting the edge of his mask to take a big swig of it before setting it between them.

“Tell me about the time loops,” Ghost says.

“Why would you want to hear about those?”

“Because I want to help you. You’re trying to handle it all alone and it’s hurting you, I can see it.”

“Real recognizes real,” Soap says and it’s undeniably a jab at Ghost’s lone-wolf tendencies, Ghost takes it with grace.

“It does. What I don’t understand is why you don’t want to talk about

it. You can tell me about it.”

“That’s the real shit thing though, isn’t it?” Soap asks and takes a swig. “I did tell you and you ended up dead anyways.”

“I ended up dead?”

“Yes you, you numpty.”

“Do... my deaths restart the cycle?” Ghost asks as if he’s putting things together, as if that would clear everything up.

“No. My deaths do.”

“But you said *I* end up dead.”

“Yeah,” Soap says with a sigh. “I’m beginning to understand that this is quite a shock to you, but I do restart the loops on purpose when you die because, and I cannae stress this enough, you are worth saving.”

“So you’ve been restarting the loops on purpose?” Ghost asks, obviously still confused.

Soap lets out a self-deprecating laugh. “Only the past few where I actually got my ass all the way over to you, before that I just died... a lot. Sometimes trying to get to you, sometimes just tryin’ shit and seeing what worked.”

“So tell me about those loops.”

“You wouldn’t want to hear about ‘em.”

“I assure you that I do want to hear about them, that’s why I’m asking. Why do you not want to tell me?” Ghost is obviously tensing and Soap wants to alleviate that, but- though he hasn’t fully shared everything in the past loops- he can make a good guess as to how the information will make Ghost feel.

“The answer to that heavily insinuates that *the Ghost* has human emotions. A thing I know you have, on occasion, attempted to scrub completely.”

“Tell me anyways.”

Soap sighs and drinks a bit more.

“First loop I got caught way back at the first house I entered. The one

with a big dog. I was injured, but I fought and I was shot going over the balcony railing. Kneecapped. I lay in the streets knowing I was dying and hearing you call for me through the radio. Then that should have been it, but it wasn't."

Ghost is watching him attentively. Soap shakes his head.

"Second loop, I thought it was premonition. It wasn't. I died again, this time at the shopping plaza. Execution style. I did make a 'your mom' joke before I went out so *haha, gottem*."

Soap knows it sounds hollow.

"Shot on third loop. Stabbed to death on the fourth. That one ranks up there with the worst. God, it fuckin' hurt and you were on comms with me and you heard the whole thing and you tried to calm me down when I couldn't breathe because blood was flooding my lungs and you sat there and talked me when all I could do was choke and sputter back at you. And you listened to me die- stop me when this becomes too much."

Ghost is still looking at him, his expression is unplaceable.

"There were a lot of stupid ass loops after that. Just shot a bunch of different ways. Sometimes it was so quick I didn't even realize I was shot until I woke up. Sometimes they were slow as fuck and any time the bleed was slow you were there on comms, checking in on me."

"You've been dying this whole time? Over and over?"

"It's not all bad. Usually, I don't cut contact and we talk the whole way. We have jokes between us, I bitch about shit and you make fun of me for it, it's not all bad."

"Why didn't you want to tell me about any of this?" Ghost asks, his eyes looking troubled. Soap realizes that Ghost is leaning in and Soap is leaning closer too.

"There are things you say and do for a dying man... I don't want to push it onto you. I don't want you to feel obligated to say or feel anything."

"But what if it wasn't just for a dying man? What if I meant it?"

"You don't even know what you said."

“But you do. What if I meant every word?”

Maybe it's the alcohol or the heartache or just that he's reached the threshold of his tolerance for pretending nothing is happening. Whatever it is, he surges forward, cupping Ghost's cheek and pulling him into a kiss.

Right against the fabric of the mask.

His top lip hits the hard teeth of the skull mask and his bottom lip hits the soft fabric resting on top of Simon's lips, he can feel more than hear as his lips part slightly with a small gasp. The position makes Soap's shoulder complain, but he ignores it, leaning in.

Ghost jerks back suddenly and Soap instantly feels a wash of embarrassment and heartbreak flow through him. Of course, he had been reading it all wrong. It was fine though, he would restart the loop and none of it would have to exist. He was so consumed by the thought that he almost didn't realize Ghost was moving.

Ghost was reaching up and gripping the top of his mask, ripping it off in one quick motion, before surging forward. His hands wound around the back of Soap's head, pulling the two of them together. It was the most emphatically and desperately Soap had ever seen someone remove an article of clothing- and he had seen some things in his time so that's saying something- much less Ghost and his *mask*.

Simon's skin was warm and his lips had the lingering taste of tequila clinging to them. Soap could feel where the scar across his mouth carved into the skin or twisted it slightly with harder scar tissue. Simon's hands were still gloved and he could feel the leather of them sliding through his hair, only a slight warmth making its way through the fabric.

They eventually pulled apart and Soap sat back only slightly, just enough to stare up at Simon's face.

His mind cataloged the things he already knew first- searching out the familiar- his warm brown eyes, the strong line of his cheekbones, jaw, and roman nose that Soap had only ever seen the hint of when Ghost wore his balaclava, and the pale skin and stubble that he had seen that glimpse of the only other time they had kissed.

The branching scar along his lips wasn't the only one on his face, but it was one of the larger ones. Most of the scars seemed smaller and older, healed to pale marks along his face, one looked like a slice to

the cheek, another like he might have split his forehead. The muscle of one of his cheeks was dented in by an old scar that curved down from his temple and had healed back to the same color as his skin but left the crevasse of it behind.

He still had the black paint around his eyes, but it had run slightly from the rain, making long black smears across his cheekbones. It made his terribly pale skin seem even paler in comparison.

His hair was pale too, not really blonde in that kind of white gold way, but pale as if all the color had been leached from it. It was cropped short, but slightly overgrown and hung limply over his brow and ears, pressed flat by too much time under the mask and cowl. It made Soap want to rake his fingers through it, fluff some of the volume back into it, but he wasn't sure if jumping straight to playing with Simon's hair was really the move when Simon was shifting nervously and slowly tensing under his gaze.

"I'm sorry, I didnae mean to stare," Soap states, realizing how long he has been sitting quietly, blinking up at Simon owlshly. "It's just that--"

"No... I know-" Simon starts.

"Yer real *braw*," Soap states.

Soap can see his lips twist in confusion and he's become so used to picking out the emotions on just his eyes and maybe a bit of his brow that this feels like reading an open book. It almost feels intimate despite being the normal amount of expression available on most people's faces.

"I'm... what?"

"Handsome."

"Oh," Simon seems surprised by that and his eyes shoot back to Soap's face.

The moment is interrupted by a flash-bang.

Soap's mind is still reeling when he feels hands grabbing him. They aren't Simon's hands. He's coughing and he can't see and his ears are ringing.

"Si!" He hacks out.

His ears are slowly coming back and he can hear the general commotion of a struggle and the sound of Ghost's voice over top of the whole thing, sounding pissed as hell.

"Leave him the *fuck alone* or I will kill you," Ghost declares in his flat serious tone that usually makes the new recruits tremble in their boots.

Someone wrenches Soap's arms behind his back and he bites down on a pained sound. The commotion builds again before settling down a bit. Soap finally gets himself to open his eyes, blinking against the mistiness that wells up in them.

Simon is on his knees, three different Shadows working to keep him there and two others pointing their guns at him. His mask isn't on, it's abandoned on the floor somewhere and he is looking at Soap with this mildly panicked look.

Soap has two different men on him, one for each shoulder, and the one at his injured shoulder has definitely discovered that weakness and has decided to take full advantage. Another Shadow has their gun pointed at his forehead but is looking over at Simon.

"What's the move, Berke?" One of the Shadows asks.

The one pointing a gun at Soap sighs. "Graves said dead or alive," she answers. "But he also showed a preference for dead."

"They could have information we need."

"Macbeth there is bleeding out which means we would have to do a patch job and keep him alive and I'm not taking a chance on the Ghost. Besides, they're both 141, better to just wipe our hands of it. There's no information that makes a 141 worth it."

"Who first then?"

"Freddy Krueger, duh."

One of the Shadows steps around and levels a gun at Simon's face. He sneers at them before they pull the trigger. Soap squeezes his eyes shut, he's already seen enough to know what Ghost looks like dead, and he doesn't want to know what it looks like when it's Simon.

"Are you really taking that thing?" One of the Shadows asks.

“It’s *the Ghost’s* mask, of course I’m keeping it,” is the response.

A gun cocks in front of Soap’s face and he cracks his eyes open to scowl at the Shadow standing above him.

“Sorry about this, Lassie,” she says indifferently. “Just be glad I didn’t sign you up for torture, hm?”

Soap, somewhat surprisingly, wakes up in an alright mood. He’s pissed, of course, don’t get him wrong. Berke has joined the list of names of people he will absolutely fuck up given the chance, but if he’s honest with himself, he knew that loop was going to end badly.

What he hadn’t accounted for was everything in the middle.

He had planned to get drunk off his ass, get killed somehow, wake back up here without a hangover, and yet, somehow, still feeling worse. He hadn’t planned for Ghost coming for him, though he was starting to realize that he should always plan for that, and he certainly hadn’t planned for a heart-to-heart. Despite the miserable ending, Soap feels lighter. Maybe it’s insane, but he can’t help it. He had told Ghost about the time loops, really really told him, not just brushed them off. He had kissed him.

He had seen Simon’s face.

And now- he promises himself- he has to find a way to do it all again, in a place where it won’t end in an execution shot for the both of them.

When Ghost radios in Soap gives him the same general rundown of the time loops he has been in and sets out.

Maybe it’s that he’s finally done this enough for it all to be muscle memory, maybe it’s that everything is just slotting into place, or maybe he is walking around a warzone being a lovestruck idiot, but everything goes smoothly.

He jokes with Ghost just to hear the same stupid punchlines and flirts lightly, but with a purpose.

The cold water sucks the same amount as usual, but now it sucks *and* he feels all light and happy, so it’s a new experience really.

They make it to the pickup truck and Ghost backs up and Soap shoots and then they're out of there, with a couple of bullets ping off the paint.

"You owe me a dry, warm, fluffy towel," Soap states, just like last time.

"Why would I owe you that?"

"You promised me in a past loop that you'd warm my towel in the dryer personally if I got to you alive. I want my towel."

"Well, if I even actually said that, I said it in a past loop and I don't remember it so it doesn't count."

"That might be a good call, there's a lot of stuff you did and said in the past loops."

"Like what?" Ghost asks a bit too quickly, his voice just a bit too sharp.

Instead of shutting down the conversation like last time Soap smiles softly.

"Oh, you know, there's a lot of things you do and say for a dying man, you don't always mean them."

"What if I did mean them?"

"You don't even know what you said," Soap points out, helpfully.

"But you do. What if I meant every word?"

"Still, you just said you don't remember it so it doesn't count."

Ghost makes a 'hrm' noise in the back of his throat.

"Unless..."

"Yes?" Ghost asks.

"What if, once we get to Alejandro's safe house and we're all patched up and everything I can tell you everything you said and you can tell me what gets to count and what doesn't for this time?"

"I think I can agree to that."

Soap leans back with a sigh and flops to the side, onto Ghost's shoulder.

"I should mention I took a stim and it's wearing off while I'm still speaking English you can understand."

"I appreciate that."

They rode in silence for a while, Soap's brain beginning to feel exceedingly distant and Ghost's shoulder only increasing in comfort.

"Should I blame the lounging on me as a side effect of the stim wearing off too?" Ghost asks after a moment.

"A loue ye," Soap states instead of answering.

"...What?"

"Ah said I *love* you. Jesus Christ, fuckin' listen mahn."

"I... 'I love you too' seems not quite big enough of a response."

"S'okay, you kin kiss me aboot it later," Soap promises.

Ghost stops the truck and Soap reluctantly sits up fully and realizes that they've arrived at Alejandro's safe house. He forcefully pushes back a couple of layers of exhaustion because once again, communication has become key.

"The door is rigged and so we need ta go through the window, but Rudy's on the other side ready to shoot anything that moves. We're going to announce ourselves and then I'm going through the windah first and you can follow."

"If he's ready to 'shoot anything that moves' I don't know if I love the idea of you goin' in first."

Soap pats Ghost's shoulder. "Ye don't have to, but that is the plan. No knifing him, alright? It's not his fault, he's bein' cautious."

They make their way over to the window and Soap shouts who they are before Ghost gives him a boost through the window. Ghost follows shortly behind him. A red beam lands on Soap's chest and he freezes. A knife goes whizzing past his head and thunks dully into a wood beam.

"Rodolfo," Soap says.

The red beam disappears.

“Soap! Ghost! You’re alive,” Rodolfo says as he yanks the knife out of the beam and jumps down to greet them.

Soap smiles at Rudy before turning to Ghost.

“I said na knifin’.”

“I didn’t ‘knife’ anyone. It was a warning throw.”

“*Dinnae* throw knives at yer friends.”

“Is Soap more Scottish than usual?” Rudy asks Ghost as Ghost comes the rest of the way down to the ground.

“Soap is experiencin’ a major adrenaline crash and blood loss at the same time.”

“Ah, I’ll go get the first aid kit then,” Rudy says with a nod.

Rudy is quick or the first aid kit’s really close, Soap can’t really tell. Ghost props him up against a hay bale and sets to work patching his shoulder with Rudy’s help.

“Graves has Alejandro and your men at a black site- I’m going to need you to actually sit still Johnny. I have two hands and Rudy, you don’t have to help,” Ghost says as he’s patching up Soap’s shoulder. “We’ll get them back, but first we’re going to need to rest up and then get our hands on some more firepower.”

“Oh I have firepower,” Rudy declares. “Alejandro hid practically a whole armory in here.”

“Any ideas about a vehicle?” Soap asks because he might be getting himself patched up, but he’s still in the game.

“How does an armored one sound?” Rudy offers with a smile.

Ghost whistles lowly. “Alejandro thought of everything.”

“He always does. You two rest, I will take first watch. I’m not tired.”

With that, Rudy leaves them alone.

“I’m not especially tired myself,” Soap lies.

“Yes, you are.”

“I’m good to keep going.”

“But,” Ghost says with a serious look. “You don’t have to, so you can rest.”

Soap sighs. “What if I go to sleep and I wake up on the cobblestone in the rain? What if it wasn’t death this whole time, it was just black? Black then restart?”

“I don’t think it is, but- if it is- you can find me again and we’ll figure it out. For now, you need to rest.”

“Why do you always say the right thing?”

“I very much do not.”

Soap hums non-comitally and leans forward, resting his head against Ghost’s.

“Will you stay with me?” he asks.

“Wouldn’t have done otherwise,” Ghost promises.

They bed down on the hay bales in the barn loft and Ghost pulls his mask off and shucks his jacket off to make a makeshift blanket. Soap tries to fight sleep still, but with Simon’s warmth radiating off the man right next to him it’s a losing battle.

Soap wakes to itchy pieces of hay stabbing his back and the weight of Simon’s head on his uninjured shoulder. It feels like heaven.

Chapter End Notes

I can't believe how quickly I finished this, it really took over my life there for a hot sec lol. The reception to this has been overwhelming, you guys are so awesome and supportive (/▽ \)

Thank you guys so much for reading and I really hope you enjoyed it! ☐

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!